32nd Anniversary Issue

THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

OCTOBER

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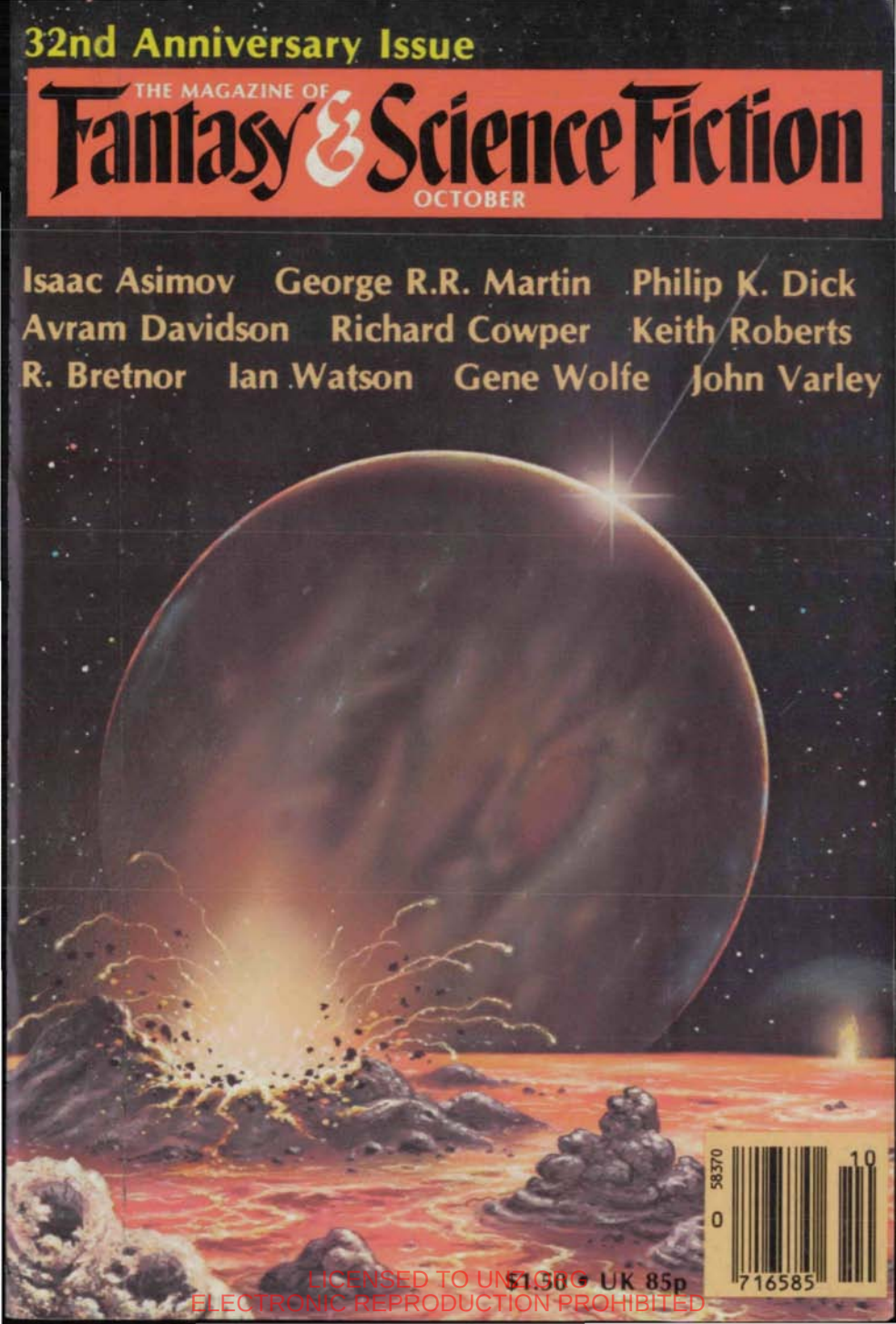

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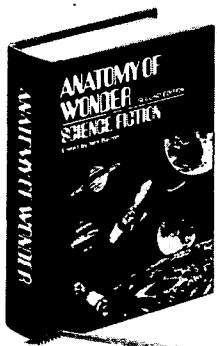

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 61, No. 4, Whole No. 365; October 1981. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $1.50 per copy. Annual subscription $15.00; $17.00 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 15%.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.

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John Varley's first F&SF story since "The Persistence of Vision" (March 1978) is a surprising and affecting tale about a starship crewman and a little girl.

The Pusher

BY

JOHN VARLEY

Things change. Ian Haise expected that. Yet there are certain constants, dictated by function and use. Ian looked for those and he seldom went wrong.

The playground was not much like the ones he had known as a child. But playgrounds are built to entertain children. They will always have something to swing on, something to slide down, something to climb. This one had all those things, and more. Part of it was thickly wooded. There was a swimming hole. The stationary apparatus was combined with dazzling light sculptures that darted in and out of reality. There were animals, too: pygmy rhinoceros and elegant gazelles no taller than your knee. They seemed unnaturally gentle and unafraid.

But most of all, the playground had children.

Ian liked children.

He sat on a wooden park bench at the edge of the trees, in the shadows, and watched them. They came in all colors and all sizes, in both sexes. There were black ones like animated licorice jellybeans and white ones like bunny rabbits, and brown ones with curly hair and more brown ones with slanted eyes and straight black hair and some who had been white but were now toasted browner than some of the brown ones.

Ian concentrated on the girls. He had tried with boys before, long ago, but it had not worked out.

He watched one black child for a time, trying to estimate her age. He thought it was around eight or nine. Too young. Another one was more like thirteen, judging from her shirt. A possibility, but he'd prefer something younger. Somebody less sophisticated, less suspicious.

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Finally he found a girl he liked. She was brown, but with startling blonde hair. Ten? Possibly eleven. Young enough, at any rate.

He concentrated on her and did the strange thing he did when he had selected the right one. He didn't know what it was, but it usually worked. Mostly it was just a matter of looking at her, keeping his eyes fixed on her no matter where she went or what she did, not allowing himself to be distracted by anything. And sure enough, in a few minutes she looked up, looked around, and her eyes locked with his. She held his gaze for a moment, then went back to her play.

He relaxed. Possibly what he did was nothing at all. He had noticed, with adult women, that if one really caught his eye so he found himself staring at her she would usually look up from what she was doing and catch him. It never seemed to fail. Talking to other men, he had found it to be a common experience. It was almost as if they could feel his gaze. Women had told him it was nonsense, or if not, it was just reaction to things seen peripherally by people trained to alertness for sexual signals. Merely an unconscious observation penetrating to the awareness; nothing mysterious, like ESP.

Perhaps. Still, Ian was very good at this sort of eye contact. Several times he had noticed the girls rubbing the backs of their necks while he observed them, or hunching their shoulders. Maybe they'd developed some kind of ESP and just didn't recognize it as such.

Now he merely watched her. He was smiling, so that every time she looked up to see him — which she did with increasing frequency — she saw a friendly, slightly graying man with a broken nose and powerful shoulders. His hands were strong, too. He kept them clasped in his lap.

Presently she began to wander in his direction.

No one watching her would have thought she was coming toward him. She probably didn't know it herself. On her way, she found reasons to stop and tumble, jump on the soft rubber mats, or chase a flock of noisy geese. But she was coming toward him, and she would end up on the park bench beside him.

He glanced around quickly. As before, there were few adults in this playground. It had surprised him when he arrived. Apparently the new conditioning techniques had reduced the numbers of the violent and twisted to the point that parents felt it safe to allow their children to run without supervision. The adults present were involved with each other. No one had given him a second glance when he arrived.

That was fine with Ian. It made what he planned to do much easier. He had his excuses ready, of course, but it could be embarrassing to be confront-

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ed with the questions representatives of the law ask single, middle-aged men who hang around playgrounds.

For a moment he considered, with real concern, how the parents of these children could feel so confident, even with mental conditioning. After all, no one was conditioned until he had first done something. New maniacs were presumably being produced every day. Typically, they looked just like everyone else until they proved their difference by some demented act.

Somebody ought to give those parents a stern lecture, he thought.

"Who are you?"

Ian frowned. Not eleven, surely, not seen up this close. Maybe not even ten. She might be as young as eight.

Would eight be all right? He tasted the idea with his usual caution, looked around again for curious eyes. He saw none.

"My name is Ian. What's yours?"

"*No.* Not your *name.* Who are *you?*"

"You mean what do I do?"

"Yes."

"I'm a pusher."

She thought that over, then smiled. She had her permanent teeth, crowded into a small jaw.

"You give away pills?"

He laughed. "Very good," he said. "You must do a lot of reading." She said nothing, but her manner indicated she was pleased.

"No," he said. "That's an old kind of pusher. I'm the other kind. But you knew that, didn't you?" When he smiled she broke into giggles. She was doing the pointless things with her hands that little girls do. He thought she had a pretty good idea of how cute she was, but no inkling of her forbidden eroticism. She was a ripe seed with sexuality ready to burst to the surface. Her body was a bony sketch, a framework on which to build a woman.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"That's a secret. What happened to your nose?"

"I broke it a long time ago. I'll bet you're twelve."

She giggled, then nodded. Eleven, then. And just barely.

"Do you want some candy?" He reached into his pocket and pulled out the pink and white striped paper bag.

She shook her head solemnly. "My mother says not to take candy from strangers."

"But we're not strangers. I'm Ian, the pusher."

She thought that over. While she hesitated he reached into the bag and picked out a chocolate thing so thick and gooey it was almost obscene. He bit into it, forcing himself to chew. He hated sweets.

"Okay," she said, and reached toward the bag. He pulled it away. She looked at him in innocent surprise.

"I just thought of something," he said. "I don't know your name. So I guess we *are* strangers."

She caught on to the game when

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she saw the twinkle in his eye. He'd practiced that. It was a good twinkle.

"My name is Radiant. Radiant Shiningstar Smith."

"A very fancy name," he said, thinking how names had changed. "For a very pretty girl." He paused, and cocked his head. "No. I don't think so. You're Radiant ... Starr. With two *r's*. ... *Captain* Radiant Starr, of the Star Patrol."

She was dubious for a moment. He wondered if he'd judged her wrong. Perhaps she was really Mizz Radiant Faintingheart Belle, or Mrs. Radiant Motherhood. But her fingernails were a bit dirty for that.

She pointed a finger at him and made a Donald Duck sound as her thumb worked back and forth. He put his hand to his heart and fell over sideways, and she dissolved in laughter. She was careful, however, to keep her weapon firmly trained on him.

"And you'd better give me that candy or I'll shoot you again."

The playground was darker now, and not so crowded. She sat beside him on the bench, swinging her legs. Her bare feet did not quite touch the dirt.

She was going to be quite beautiful. He could see it clearly in her face. As for the body ... who could tell?

Not that he really gave a damn.

She was dressed in a little of this and a little of that, worn here and there without much regard for his concepts of modesty. Many of the children wore nothing. It had been something of a shock when he arrived. Now he was almost used to it, but he still thought it incautious on the part of her parents. Did they really think the world was that safe, to let an eleven-year-old girl go practically naked in a public place?

He sat there listening to her prattle about her friends — the ones she hated and the one or two she simply adored — with only part of his attention.

He inserted um's and uh-huh's in the right places.

She was cute, there was no denying it. She seemed as sweet as a child that age ever gets, which can be very sweet and as poisonous as a rattlesnake, almost at the same moment. She had the capacity to be warm, but it was on the surface. Underneath, she cared mostly about herself. Her loyalty would be a transitory thing, bestowed easily, just as easily forgotten.

And why not? She was young. It was perfectly healthy for her to be that way.

But did he dare try to touch her?

It was crazy. It was as insane as they all told him it was. It worked so seldom. Why would it work with her? He felt a weight of defeat.

"Are you okay?"

"Huh? Me? Oh, sure, I'm all right. Isn't your mother going to be worried about you?"

"I don't have to be in for hours and hours yet." For a moment she looked so grown up he almost believed the lie.

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"Well, I'm getting tired of sitting here. And the candy's all gone." He looked at her face. Most of the chocolate had ended up in a big circle around her mouth, except where she had wiped it daintily on her shoulder or forearm. "What's back there?"

She turned.

"That? That's the swimming hole."

"Why don't we go over there? I'll tell you a story."

The promise of a story was not enough to keep her out of the water. He didn't know if that was good or bad. He knew she was smart, a reader, and she had an imagination. But she was also active. That pull was too strong for him. He sat far from the water, under some bushes, and watched her swim with the three other children still in the park this late in the evening.

Maybe she would come back to him, and maybe she wouldn't. It wouldn't change his life either way, but it might change hers.

She emerged dripping and infinitely cleaner from the murky water. She dressed again in her random scraps, for whatever good it did her, and came to him, shivering.

"I'm cold," she said.

"Here." He took off his jacket. She looked at his hands as he wrapped it around her, and she reached out and touched the hardness of his shoulder.

"You sure must be strong," she commented.

"Pretty strong. I work hard, being a pusher."

"Just what *is* a pusher?" she said, and stifled a yawn.

"Come sit on my lap, and I'll tell you."

He did tell her, and it was a very good story that no adventurous child could resist. He had practiced that story, refined it, told it many times into a recorder until he had the rhythms and cadences just right, until he found just the right words — not too difficult words, but words with some fire and juice in them.

And once more he grew encouraged. She had been tired when he started, but he gradually caught her attention. It was possible no one had ever told her a story in quite that way. She was used to sitting before the screen and having a story shoved into her eyes and ears. It was something new to be able to interrupt with questions and get answers. Even reading was not like that. It was the oral tradition of storytelling, and it could still mesmerize the *n*th generation of the electronic age.

"That sounds great," she said, when she was sure he was through.

"You liked it?"

"I really truly did. I think I want to be a pusher when I grow up. That was a really neat story."

"Well, that's not actually the story I was going to tell you. That's just what it's like to be a pusher."

"You mean you have another story?"

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"Sure." He looked at his watch. "But I'm afraid it's getting late. It's almost dark, and everybody's gone home. You'd probably better go, too."

She was in agony, torn between what she was supposed to do and what she wanted. It really should be no contest, if she was who he thought she was.

"Well ... but — but I'll come back here tomorrow and you —"

He was shaking his head.

"My ship leaves in the morning," he said. "There's no time."

"Then tell me now! I can stay out. Tell me now. Please please please?"

He coyly resisted, harrumphed, protested, but in the end allowed himself to be seduced. He felt very good. He had her like a five-pound trout on a twenty-pound line. It wasn't sporting. But, then, he wasn't playing a game.

So at last he got to his specialty.

He sometimes wished he could claim the story for his own, but the fact was he could not make up stories. He no longer tried to. Instead, he cribbed from every fairy tale and fantasy story he could find. If he had a genius, it was in adapting some of the elements to fit the world she knew — while keeping it strange enough to enthrall her — and in ad-libbing the end to personalize it.

It was a wonderful tale he told. It had enchanted castles sitting on mountains of glass, moist caverns beneath the sea, fleets of starships and shining riders astride horses that flew the galaxy. There were evil alien creatures, and others with much good in them. There were drugged potions. Scaled beasts roared out of hyperspace to devour planets.

Amid all the turmoil strode the Prince and Princess. They got into frightful jams and helped each other out of them.

The story was never quite the same. He watched her eyes. When they wandered, he threw away whole chunks of story. When they widened, he knew what parts to plug in later. He tailored it to her reactions.

The child was sleepy. Sooner or later she would surrender. He needed her in a trance state, neither awake nor asleep. That is when the story would end.

"... and though the healers labored long and hard, they could not save the Princess. She died that night, far from her Prince."

Her mouth was a little round *o*. Stories were not supposed to end that way.

"Is that *all*? She died, and she never saw the Prince again?"

"Well, not quite all. But the rest of it probably isn't true, and I shouldn't tell it to you." Ian felt pleasantly tired. His throat was a little raw, making him hoarse. Radiant was a warm weight on his lap.

"You *have* to tell me, you know," she said, reasonably. He supposed she

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was right. He took a deep breath.

"All right. At the funeral, all the greatest people from that part of the galaxy were in attendance. Among them was the greatest Sorcerer who ever lived. His name ... but I really shouldn't tell you his name. I'm sure he'd be very cross if I did.

"This Sorcerer passed by the Princess's bier ... that's a —"

"I know, I *know*, Ian. Go on!"

"Suddenly he frowned and leaned over her pale form. 'What is this?' he thundered. 'Why was I not told?' Everyone was very concerned. This Sorcerer was a dangerous man. One time when someone insulted him he made a spell that turned everyone's heads backwards so they had to walk around with rear-view mirrors. No one knew what he would do if he got really angry.

"'This Princess is wearing the Starstone,' he said, and drew himself up and frowned all around as if he were surrounded by idiots. I'm sure he thought he was, and maybe he was right. Because he went on to tell them just what the Starstone was, and what it did, something no one there had ever heard before. And this is the part I'm not sure of. Because, though everyone knew the Sorcerer was a wise and powerful man, he was also known as a great liar.

"He said that the Starstone was capable of capturing the essence of a person at the moment of her death. All her wisdom, all her power, all her knowledge and beauty and strength would flow into the stone and be held there, timelessly."

"In suspended animation," Radiant breathed.

"Precisely. When they heard this, the people were amazed. They buffeted the Sorcerer with questions, to which he gave few answers, and those only grudgingly. Finally he left in a huff. When he was gone everyone talked long into the night about the things he had said. Some felt the Sorcerer had held out hope that the Princess might yet live on. That if her body were frozen, the Prince, upon his return, might somehow infuse her essence back within her. Others thought the Sorcerer had said that was impossible, that the Princess was doomed to a half-life, locked in the stone.

"But the opinion that prevailed was this:

"The Princess would probably never come fully back to life. But her essence might flow from the Starstone and into another, if the right person could be found. All agreed this person must be a young maiden. She must be beautiful, very smart, swift of foot, loving, kind ... oh, my, the list was very long. Everyone doubted such a person could be found. Many did not even want to try.

"But at last it was decided the Starstone should be given to a faithful friend of the Prince. He would search the galaxy for this maiden. If she existed, he would find her.

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"So he departed with the blessings of many worlds behind him, vowing to find the maiden and give her the Starstone."

He stopped again, cleared his throat, and let the silence grow.

"Is that all?" she said, at last, in a whisper.

"Not quite all," he admitted. "I'm afraid I tricked you."

"Tricked me?"

He opened the front of his coat, which was still draped around her shoulders. He reached in past her bony chest and down into an inner pocket of the coat. He came up with the crystal. It was oval, with one side flat. It pulsed ruby light as it sat in the palm of his hand.

"It shines," she said, looking at it wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

"Yes, it does. And that means you're the one."

"Me?"

"Yes. Take it." He handed it to her, and as he did so, he nicked it with his thumbnail. Red light spilled into her hands, flowed between her fingers, seemed to soak into her skin. When it was over, the crystal still pulsed, but dimmed. Her hands were trembling.

"It felt very, very hot," she said.

"That was the essence of the Princess."

"And the Prince? Is he still looking for her?"

"No one knows. I think he's still out there, and some day he will come back for her."

"And what then?"

He looked away from her. "I can't say. I think, even though you are lovely, and even though you have the Starstone, that he will just pine away. He loved her very much."

"I'd take care of him," she promised.

"Maybe that would help. But I have a problem now. I don't have the heart to tell the Prince that she is dead. Yet I feel that the Starstone will draw him to it one day. If he comes and finds you, I fear for him. I think perhaps I should take the stone to a far part of the galaxy, some place he could never find it. Then at least he would never know. It might be better that way."

"But I'd help him," she said, earnestly. "I promise. I'd wait for him, and when he came, I'd take her place. You'll see."

He studied her. Perhaps she would. He looked into her eyes for a long time, and at last let her see his satisfaction.

"Very well. You can keep it then."

"I'll wait for him," she said. "You'll see."

She was very tired, almost asleep.

"You should go home now," he suggested.

"Maybe I could just lie down for a moment," she said.

"All right." He lifted her gently and placed her prone on the ground. He stood looking at her, then knelt beside

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her and began to gently stroke her forehead. She opened her eyes with no alarm, then closed them again. He continued to stroke her.

Twenty minutes later he left the playground, alone.

He was always depressed afterwards. It was worse than usual this time. She had been much nicer than he had imagined at first. Who could have guessed such a romantic heart beat beneath all that dirt?

He found a phone booth several blocks away. Punching her name into information yielded a fifteen-digit number, which he called. He held his hand over the camera eye.

A woman's face appeared on his screen.

"Your daughter is in the playground, at the south end by the pool, under the bushes," he said. He gave the address of the playground.

"We were so worried! What ... is she ... who is —"

He hung up and hurried away.

Most of the other pushers thought he was sick. Not that it mattered. Pushers were a tolerant group when it came to other pushers, and especially when it came to anything a pusher might care to do to a puller. He wished he had never told anyone how he spent his leave time, but he had, and now he had to live with it.

So, while they didn't care if he amused himself by pulling the legs and arms off infant puller pups, they were all just back from ground leave and couldn't pass up an opportunity to get on each other's nerves. They ragged him mercilessly.

"How were the swing-sets this trip, Ian?"

"Did you bring me those dirty knickers I asked for?"

"Was it good for you, honey? Did she pant and slobber?"

"My ten-year-old baby, she's a-pullin' me back home...."

Ian bore it stoically. It was in extremely bad taste, and he was the brunt of it, but it really didn't matter. It would end as soon as they lifted again. They would never understand what he sought, but he felt he understood them. They hated coming to Earth. There was nothing for them there, and perhaps they wished there was.

And he was a pusher himself. He didn't care for pullers. He agreed with the sentiment expressed by Marian, shortly after lift-off. Marian had just finished her first ground leave after her first voyage. So naturally she was the drunkest of them all.

"Gravity sucks," she said, and threw up.

It was three months to Amity, and three months back. He hadn't the foggiest idea of how far it was in miles; after the tenth or eleventh zero his mind clicked off.

Amity. Shit City. He didn't even

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get off the ship. Why bother? The planet was peopled with things that looked a little like ten-ton caterpillars and a little like sentient green turds. Toilets were a revolutionary idea to the Amiti; so were ice cream bars, sherbets, sugar donuts, and peppermint. Plumbing had never caught on, but sweets had, and fancy desserts from every nation on Earth. In addition, there was a pouch of reassuring mail for the forlorn human embassy. The cargo for the return trip was some grayish sludge that Ian supposed someone on Earth found tremendously valuable, and a packet of desperate mail for the folks back home. Ian didn't need to read the letters to know what was in them. They could all be summed up as "Get me *out* of here!"

He sat at the viewport and watched an Amiti family lumbering and farting its way down the spaceport road. They paused every so often to do something that looked like an alien cluster-fuck. The road was brown. The land around it was brown, and in the distance were brown, unremarkable hills. There was a brown haze in the air, and the sun was yellow-brown.

He thought of castles perched on mountains of glass, of Princes and Princesses, of shining white horses galloping among the stars.

He spent the return trip just as he had on the way out: sweating down in the gargantuan pipes of the stardrive. Just beyond the metal walls unimaginable energies pulsed. And on the walls themselves, tiny plasmoids grew into bigger plasmoids. The process was too slow to see, but if left unchecked the encrustations would soon impair the engines. His job was to scrape them off.

Not everyone was cut out to be an astrogator.

And what of it? It was honest work. He had made his choices long ago. You spent your life either pulling gees or pushing *c*. And when you got tired, you grabbed some z's. If there was a pushers' code, that was it.

The plasmoids were red and crystalline, teardrop-shaped. When he broke them free of the walls, they had one flat side. They were full of a liquid light that felt as hot as the center of the sun.

It was always hard to get off the ship. A lot of pushers never did. One day, he wouldn't either.

He stood for a few moments looking at it all. It was necessary to soak it in passively at first, get used to the changes. Big changes didn't bother him. Buildings were just the world's furniture, and he didn't care how it was arranged. Small changes worried the shit out of him. Ears, for instance. Very few of the people he saw had earlobes. Each time he returned he felt a little more like an ape who has fallen from his tree. One day he'd return to find everybody had three eyes or six fingers, or that little girls no longer

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cared to hear stories of adventure.

He stood there, dithering, getting used to the way people were painting their faces, listening to what sounded like Spanish being spoken all around him. Occasional English or Arabic words seasoned it. He grabbed a crewmate's arm and asked him where they were. The man didn't know. So he asked the captain, and she said it was Argentina, or it had been when they left.

The phone booths were smaller. He wondered why.

There were four names in his book. He sat there facing the phone, wondering which name to call first. His eyes were drawn to Radiant Shiningstar Smith, so he punched that name into the phone. He got a number and an address in Novosibirsk.

Checking the timetable he had picked — putting off making the call — he found the antipodean shuttle left on the hour. Then he wiped his hands on his pants and took a deep breath and looked up to see her standing outside the phone booth. They regarded each other silently for a moment. She saw a man much shorter than she remembered, but powerfully built, with big hands and shoulders and a pitted face that would have been forbidding but for the gentle eyes. He saw a tall woman around forty years old who was fully as beautiful as he had expected she would be. The hand of age had just begun to touch her. He thought she was fighting that waistline and fretting about those wrinkles, but none of that mattered to him. Only one thing mattered, and he would know it soon enough.

"You *are* Ian Haise, aren't you?" she said, at last.

"It was sheer luck I remembered you again," she was saying. He noted the choice of words. She could have said coincidence.

"It was two years ago. We were moving again and I was sorting through some things and I came across that plasmoid. I hadn't thought about you in ... oh, it must have been fifteen years."

He said something noncommittal. They were in a restaurant, away from most of the other patrons, at a booth near a glass wall beyond which spaceships were being trundled to and from the blast pits.

"I hope I didn't get you into trouble," he said.

She shrugged it away.

"You did, some, but that was so long ago. I certainly wouldn't bear a grudge that long. And the fact is, I thought it was all worth it at the time."

She went on to tell him of the uproar he had caused in her family, of the visits by the police, the interrogation, puzzlement, and final helplessness. No one knew quite what to make of her story. They had identified him quickly enough, only to find he had left Earth, not to return for a long, long time.

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"I didn't break any laws," he pointed out.

"That's what no one could understand. I told them you had talked to me and told me a long story, and then I went to sleep. None of them seemed interested in what the story was about. So I didn't tell them. And I didn't tell them about the ... the Starstone." She smiled. "Actually, I was relieved they hadn't asked. I was determined not to tell them, but I was a little afraid of holding it all back. I thought they were agents of the ... who were the villains in your story? I've forgotten."

"It's not important."

"I guess not. But something is."

"Yes."

"Maybe you should tell me what it is. Maybe you can answer the question that's been in the back of my mind for twenty-five years, ever since I found out that thing you gave me was just the scrapings from a starship engine."

"Was it?" he said, looking into her eyes. "Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying it *was* more than that. I'm asking *you* if it wasn't more."

"Yes, I guess it was more," she said, at last.

"I'm glad."

"I believed in that story passionately for ... oh, years and years. Then I stopped believing it."

"All at once?"

"No. Gradually. It didn't hurt much. Part of growing up, I guess."

"And you remembered me."

"Well, that took some work. I went to a hypnotist when I was twenty-five and recovered your name and the name of your ship. Did you know —"

"Yes. I mentioned them on purpose."

She nodded, and they fell silent again. When she looked at him now, he saw more sympathy, less defensiveness. But there was still a question.

"Why?" she said.

He nodded, then looked away from her, out to the starships. He wished he was on one of them, pushing *c*. It wasn't working. He knew it wasn't. He was a weird problem to her, something to get straightened out, a loose end in her life that would irritate until it was made to fit in, then be forgotten.

To hell with it.

"Hoping to get laid," he said. When he looked up she was slowly shaking her head back and forth.

"Don't trifle with me, Haise. You're not as stupid as you look. You knew I'd be married, leading my own life. You knew I wouldn't drop it all because of some half-remembered fairy tale thirty years ago. *Why?*"

And how could he explain the strangeness of it all to her?"

"What do you do?" He recalled something, and rephrased it. "Who *are* you?"

She looked startled. "I'm a mysteliologist."

He spread his hands. "I don't even know what that is."

"Come to think of it, there was no such thing when you left."

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"That's it, in a way," he said. He felt helpless again. "Obviously, I had no way of knowing what you'd do, what you'd become, what would happen to you that you had no control over. All I was gambling on was that you'd remember me. Because that way ..." He saw the planet Earth looming once more out the viewport. So many, many years and only six months later. A planet full of strangers. It didn't matter that Amity was full of strangers. But Earth was home, if that word still had any meaning for him.

"I wanted somebody my own age I could talk to," he said. "That's all. All I want is a friend."

He could see her trying to understand what it was like. She wouldn't, but maybe she'd come close enough to think she did.

"Maybe you've found one," she said, and smiled. "At least I'm willing to get to know you, considering the effort you've put into this."

"It wasn't much effort. It seems so long-term to you, but it wasn't to me. I held you on my lap six months ago."

"How long is your leave?" she asked.

"Two months."

"Would you like to come stay with us for a while? We have room in our house."

"Will your husband mind?"

"Neither my husband nor my wife. That's them sitting over there, pretending to ignore us." Ian looked, caught the eye of a woman in her late twenties. She was sitting across from a man Ian's age, who now turned and looked at Ian with some suspicion but no active animosity. The woman smiled; the man reserved judgment.

Radiant had a wife. Well, times change.

"Those two in the red skirts are police," Radiant was saying. "So is that man over by the wall, and the one at the end of the bar."

"I spotted two of them," Ian said. When she looked surprised, he said, "Cops always have a look about them. That's one of the things that don't change."

"You go back quite a ways, don't you? I'll bet you have some good stories."

Ian thought about it, and nodded. "Some, I suppose."

"I should tell the police they can go home. I hope you don't mind that we brought them in."

"Of course not."

"I'll do that, and then we can go. Oh, and I guess I should call the children and tell them we'll be home soon." She laughed, reached across the table and touched his hand. "See what can happen in six months? I have three children, and Gillian has two."

He looked up, interested.

"Are any of them girls?"

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"Well, I hate to say I told you so."

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Ian Watson, an Oxford scholar who was corrupted early by science fiction, offers a brisk and hilarious tale about slavery (and worse) in space, and I never thought I could feel anything for a dog-flea....

The Call of the Wild: the Dog-Flea Version

(with apologies to Jack London)

BY
IAN WATSON

Chapter One: Into the Alien

Buck Flea did not listen to the radio, or he would have known that mysterious lights had been seen dodging about Gainsboro County by night and haunting the stray dog pound in Gainsboro, worrying the captive dogs into a frenzy of barking and howling. and howling.

No one suggested that there was any connection between these lights and "flying saucers." The lights were too small; they were more like flashlights in the hands of invisible prowlers. Even though no pet dog was reported missing, vivisectionists were the principal suspects.

Thus no one realized that the Earth had been visited by kidnappers from the stars — no one, that is, apart from the fifty luckless members of Aleppo's Flea Circus.

Even Aleppo himself, discovering to his horror that his entire flea troupe (and his livelihood) had vanished over-

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night, made no connection with the phantom lights. He blamed the disappearance on the action of some malicious boy who had slunk into the tent and cut a penny-sized hole in the belljar which the fleas used as their living quarters.

Buck had been the King of the Circus, with a fine pride in himself, to which all the other fleas consented. Aleppo had showered praise on Buck and pampered him — though since the form of this pampering mainly involved letting Buck take mighty leaps about the circus tent, unhampered by his thread-harness (for Aleppo knew that Buck would always faithfully return), this had only served to keep Buck in fine trim, with thruster muscles as strong as steel springs.

Now Buck found himself chained in the hold of the mother ship of the Zogs. Each flea from the circus was fastened to the edge of thin fissures cut into the metal wall — too thin for any of them to retreat into.

Three Zogs strolled round the hold, surveying their haul with crude satisfaction. Fifty at a go was a real bonanza. The Zogs were stout, four-legged creatures with a long proboscis like an elephant's trunk for a nose. They wore rather dirty uniforms and stood about two and half times the height of a flea — for as a man is to a dog, so a Zog is to a flea.

The trio halted opposite Buck.

"This one's worth a hundred and fifty truffles, or I'm a square trunk," said one of the Zogs, rubbing his finger-tentacles together greedily.

"That's if you break him, first," snuffled the second Zog.

"Redswet's no slouch at flea-breaking!" laughed the third.

The Zog named Redswet advanced on Buck. And Buck, with rage in his heart and the very devil in his eyes, leapt at the Zog to bite him.

Buck left the floor at a much higher speed than he had expected — for Zoggish gravity, as maintained in the mother ship, was far weaker than Earth's hold on a flea. He would have sailed right over Redswet's head. But then the chain snapped him to a halt in midair, throttling him. At the same moment Redswet beat him to the deck with a club. The blow stung like fire; it was electric.

Again and again Buck leapt at the Zog, and each time he was felled, until he lay hopelessly dazed upon the deck.

Now Redswet bent over Buck and patted him fearlessly upon the head; and even though all the hairs along Buck's carapace bristled, he endured the alien touch without further protest.

"A hundred and fifty? Three hundred, you mean!" cried Redswet. "He'll be the high-jumper of all time!"

And the trio passed on, to taunt the other fleas into a rage and then subdue them.

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Chapter Two: The Law of Club and Crack

That night when the mother ship got under way, waves of gravity pulses made the prisoners in the hold feel wretchedly sick.

The next day, and for several days thereafter, their education by electric club continued, and very soon all the gentility of Aleppo's circus was beaten out of Buck, though none of his agility. From the neat orderliness of the circus, where he had worn a fine flea-jacket and had entered gladly into thread-harness to pull a tiny carriage, Buck quickly became a primordial flea, leaping wildly — all to no avail, so that he must bow and bide his time. From a civilized flea, he became the equivalent of an obedient tiger.

No bowls of blood were brought for the captives to drink, even though some of the fleas fawned contemptibly upon their captors, and one — Marlon, crazed with thirst — fought through the sting of the club to force Redswet to the deck. Quickly increasing the electric charge, Redswet killed Marlon, who had gone mad.

And still no blood was brought.

As Buck grew weaker and began to consume his own body fluids, becoming a two-dimensional shadow of the flea he had been, he realized how cruelly — yet how practically — it was planned that they should pass the voyage. He crawled into the crack in the metal wall, which now fitted his body easily.

For a flea can lie comatose in a crack for as long as seven years, till the vibration of a passing host awakens it.

Perhaps the voyage to the star of the Zogs did last seven years — years during which the Zogs either slept in freezers, or else speeded up their time perception with drugs.

One day the ship vibrated mightily. At once Buck roused and leapt from his crack — to find a bowl of lukewarm artificial blood waiting for him. He settled to gorge, as did all the other surviving fleas at one bowl or another.

Each day from now on they were fed with brackish blood. But there was never enough to satisfy their hunger. Soon flea began to steal from flea. Savage ruthlessness replaced even the memory of the civilized amenities of circus life.

Their chains were lengthened, too — for none of them would dare attack the Zogs — so that they could all attack each other, muzzle to muzzle. Fair play became a forgotten code. Though if a fight looked as though it would end in death, one of the Zogs always broke it up with his club.

Thus it was in a savage yet obedient frame of mind that the fleas arrived on the world of the Zogs, to be sold at auction in the boom town of Richclouds.

And Buck, who had learnt well the law of club and crack, bided his time.

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Chapter Three: The Toil of Net and Truffle

The planet of the Zogs is a small, low-gravity world which keeps its atmosphere thanks to a self-repairing membrane of organic nature that floats on top of the stratosphere.

By Zoggish standards, of course, their world was by no means small; nor was the gravity slight. And this was the source of the Zogs' problems. For their most delicious food was an aerial creature resembling a floating, mobile truffle.

Formerly, these truffles drifted by only a couple of Zog-spans above the ground, so that Zogs only needed to rear up on their hind legs and pluck them with their trunks. Zogs had grown fat and heavy on that fare for generations.

But due to survival of the fittest and the evolution of a rudimentary sense of self-preservation, the truffles began to live higher and higher in the air till no heavy Zog could hope to catch one, unassisted.

One creature still leapt high into the sky, and through the sky from truffle to truffle, sucking their juices, though without killing them. This was the feral or wolf-flea. But it was completely untamable and invariably pined away in captivity (with the exception of one almost legendary wolf-flea called Red Fang). So the Zogs had begun to raid Earth for a flea that would leap till its heart broke with the strain of hauling the great truffle nets into the sky and would even be heartbroken if it was denied its proud work at the nets.

Buck found himself sold to Perro and Fronswa, two rough but good-natured Zogs who needed a new anchor-flea for their net.

Hitching the flea team to a balloon-sled on which the net was heaped, Perro and Fronswa set off leapingly into the wilderness north of Richclouds, where Buck began to learn his new trade in this junior but taxing position.

A truffle-net team operates thus: at the front end of the net is the top flea, who first selects the direction of flight and drags the net into the sky. To his right is the sub-leader. Behind each of these are two wing-fleas, who take up the weight of the net. Last of all comes the anchor-flea, who must hold the net taut and drag it to the ground on a depressed trajectory — a difficult jumping feat.

Buck learnt not to jump too strongly, or he would sail the back of the net right over the truffle prey. He learnt not to get caught in the traces by which he pulled the net. He learnt from his own painful errors and from the friendly clubbings of Perro and Fronswa. Above all, he learnt from the nippings of the top flea, Saliva, who conceived a fine jealous enmity for Buck. For Buck learnt fast, and the truffle catch was good, even though they had

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to leap the net higher and more skillfully than ever before.

And Buck bided his time.

Chapter Four: The Dominant Primordial Flea

The inevitable showdown between Buck and Saliva came at last. For weeks now Buck had been subtly opposing Saliva in his bullying of the team. As a result, discipline was collapsing.

One cloudy day towards the end of the season, a pack of wolf-fleas leapt into their camp. They punctured the balloon-sled so that it overturned. Hungrily they tore open the bags of artificial dried blood which (mixed with water and heated over a fire) was the fleas' usual food.

Immediately battle was joined between the fleas of Earth and the wolf-fleas. While Perro and Fronswa flailed about indiscriminately with their clubs, swearing foully, one attacker lost a leg to the jaws of the sub-leader, and one of the wing-fleas lost an eye.

Crashing into one of the attackers in midair, Buck was dashed to the ground; and Saliva seized his chance to leap upon Buck treacherously in the confusion. If Buck could be injured badly enough, it was the law of the wild that the rest of the team would tear him apart.

Buck fled. Saliva leapt after him. As soon as Buck reached open ground, he turned. The two fleas leapt at each other time and again, trying to ride each other down to the ground for the fatal bite.

Buck was already losing blood from nips all over his body — and Saliva was still quite unscathed — when Buck twisted right over in mid-air. Hanging on to Saliva's carapace upside-down, he bit clear through one of the top flea's thruster legs.

Saliva took off again, lop-sided. But Buck had calculated this. He was on to Saliva again, biting his other thruster. And now Saliva could no longer leap. He could only crawl. Buck did not even bother with the killing bite. As he hopped back towards camp, bleeding but triumphant, the wolf-fleas were already leaping high above him towards the doomed Saliva.

Buck fixed his eye on the red sun of the Zog-world, as though it was a globe of blood that he could bite and suck if only he jumped high enough. He thrilled. He had made his kill, and it was good.

Chapter Five: Who Has Won to the Top of the Net

"He's two devils, that Buck," grinned Fronswa, as he fastened Buck into the top flea position.

The other fleas had all been surprised at the speed with which Buck nipped them into order now that Saliva had been killed. It had been the two

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Zogs' plan to shift one of the wing-fleas forward to sub-leader's place and promote the sub-leader to top flea. But Buck would have none of it, hopping around the camp for a whole hour, refusing the traces till he got his way.

So now, with one wing-flea position empty, the balloon-sled bounced out of camp, net folded neatly on it, the fleas ready to leap it into the sky at Buck's signal. Perro scouted out ahead.

The leap, when it came, brought down a whole cloud of high-flying truffles — sufficient, in fact, for the two Zogs to return to Richclouds right away.

Chapter Six: For the Love of a Zog

Back in Richclouds, Fronswa and Perro sold their whole flea-team to a trio of tenderfoots who were bent on making their fortune even though the aerial truffle season was nearly over.

Wearily, Buck and his team set out once again, the balloon-sled loaded with useless baggage and a second-hand net full of holes, through which most trapped truffles could escape.

From the beginning everything went wrong. The three Zogs — a husband and wife and her brother — quarreled all the time. They pitched camp incompetently. They were brutal to the team. Nor had they brought enough dried blood for the fleas. Worse yet, these Zogs were so feckless that often they did not even bother to mix the dried blood with water, let alone warm the mixture over a fire. They simply scattered it on the ground, dry as it was, for the fleas to nip up as best they could. The food was like gravel in their stomachs, and the team rapidly wasted away, first one wing-flea dying, then a second, till one morning not even the blows of the club could rouse the team from its apathy.

As the brother Zog was belaboring the exhausted, starving Buck, there came a cry of anger from the forest.

"If you strike that flea again, I'll kill you!"

Thus Buck, who by now had little love for Zogs as a species, met the one Zog whom he would love with wild abandon.

This Zog was called Thorgon.

Nevertheless, as Buck crouched by Thorgon's fire a month later, once more a strong and healthy flea, he found himself dreaming back, far back, to a time before the generations of the circus, to a time long before the age of the domestic dog, back to a time when there were only untamed wolves, and beyond that still to a primeval time when his remote ancestors had been dinosaur fleas, riding Tyrannosaurus Rex into battle — shortly before the dinosaurs had crashed to the ground and the first flea of his line had leapt on to an inconspicuous furry little mammal on the forest floor and tasted hot blood all year round, and all day long.

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Fierce as his passion for Thorgon was, it only eclipsed and could not extinguish this other passion that had stirred in him first when he killed Saliva: the yearning to be free and wild as his ancestors on Earth had once been — the primal urge to become a feral flea himself.

Thorgon would call. Buck would open his dozing eyes — upon Zoggish reality.

Then Thorgon would chest-tumble Buck affectionately and Buck would nip Thorgon's finger-tentacles fiercely enough to leave creases in them — but Thorgon knew that this was a love-bite.

Came the day the following year when Thorgon breezed into a bar in Roundtown. Dozens of Zogs were sucking up trufflejuice from bowls and squirting it down their throats. "Clubtrunk," a malicious Zog, dipped his trunk into Thorgon's bowl and sprayed him in the eyes — whereupon Buck flew at Clubtrunk's throat, nipping it till he was hauled away.

"Your flea's bitten me!" cried Clubtrunk. But a "netters' meeting," called on the spot, decided that Buck had been provoked; and his fame as a loyal flea began to spread.

Came the day when Buck saved Thorgon from a whole pack of wolf-fleas, supporting all the injured Zog's weight upon his own back as he jumped him out of danger.

Came the day when Thorgon, drunk on Buck's fame and on trufflejuice, boasted that *his* flea could leap a whole net unaided over the roofs of Nosewad City — what's more, a net already loaded with a hundred truffles.

The odds were three to one against, even though one of the spectators, after feeling Buck's fine thruster muscles, offered a thousand truffles for the flea just as he stood.

A net was piled with truffles, and Buck was harnessed in the traces. For a whole minute Thorgon embraced Buck, nuzzling the flea's head with his own head, cursing him lovingly. Then he stood off.

And Buck leapt.

The assembled Zogs forgot to breathe as the great net soared upwards from the street.

"Gad, sir!" spluttered the Zog who had admired Buck's muscles, as the net sank out of sight over the roofs of Nosewad. "There never was such a flea before! I'll give twelve hundred for him, gladly."

Thorgon was weeping and cursing with the love of Buck. "No, sir. You can go to the Earth, sir, and be damned.

Chapter Seven: The Leap into the Wild

Thorgon's winnings provided him with sufficient funds to realize the great ambition of his life. For somewhere far to the north of Richclouds, way out in the mountainous wilderness where tribes of savage Zogs still roamed, was believed to be a hidden valley

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which was the truffles birthyard — the motherlode of all truffles. Other Zogs, too, had dreamed of finding that valley, and all had failed in the attempt.

Buying a team of strong fleas, whom Buck soon bit into shape, and loading the balloon-sled with sacks of dried blood and a fine strong net, Thorgon set out.

They wandered for months. Sometimes they pressed on, almost nonstop, for days on end in vain pursuit of the source of some particularly dense stream of truffles floating overhead. Sometimes they camped for a whole week.

At times when they camped, while Thorgon fished for zamn with his trunk, sucking his catch ashore — some to satisfy his immediate Zoggish hunger, others to dry or smoke for the next stage of the journey — Buck would blink by the campfire. And in the firelight the vision of a wilder world, on which his ancestors had ridden wolves and dinosaurs, asserted itself ever more clearly.

Then Buck would rouse himself and leap away from the camp, over hill, down dale, sometimes into the very clouds, only returning after a whole day of jumping through the wilderness. Buck did not know why he did these things, but do them he must.

One day, ranging far out, and high in the sky, Buck saw a female wolf-flea beneath him. He pursued her playfully as she tried to escape. No wolf-flea was as large as Buck. No wolf-flea could compete with him in leaping. Eventually she panted, exhausted, up against a cliff. Buck hopped to her in a friendly way, for he meant her no harm. As soon as she realized that he did not intend to suck her dry, they leapt together. Hanging onto a floating truffle, they supped. Jumping, they sailed through the sky to another truffle.

Only reluctantly, and after a long time, did Buck heed his greater love — of Thorgon. He leapt back to camp and stayed at the Zog's heels for days, watching every move he made, adoring him. But he had heard the call now, like a song from the sky.

Finally, Buck leapt away again. Into the sky. Bounce. And over a hill. Up to a drifting truffle. On through a cloud to another truffle....

Buck's body was in ecstasy. He was a flea tuned to the utmost physical peak. And from that peak, in the sky, he looked down on the wide world — as once he had looked down on the vanquished Saliva — and found it good.

This time Buck was away for several days. When he jumped back at last, it was to find a trail of dead fleas with feathered arrows sticking through their bodies. Two of the team — the subleader and a wing-flea — had obviously put up a fight; their mouths were red with blood.

A noise of howling and stamping came to his ears from where the camp had been. Hopping into a tree, Buck saw a band of twenty Zog savages

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dancing around Thorgon's dead body. They were able to dance, since they were leaner and lighter than a civilized Zog, having no nets to trap large numbers of truffles.

What happened next became part of legend. Fury blinded Buck to caution. Like an arrow himself, he flew straight through the air at the throat of the chief of the savage Zogs, tearing it out in one bite. Without pausing to suck a single drop of blood, he was onto the next savage, and the next — and they were dead too.

Buck's leaps were so speedy and so short that the savages had no chance of bringing him down with an arrow, though two savages shot each other in the attempt.

They fled. And Buck pursued them with contemptuous ease. He even allowed a single survivor to escape; and this survivor was to spread an awful warning, of the Evil Flea who had destroyed a whole hunting party, in a certain valley which would be avoided by all savage Zogs for ever more.

His vengeance completed, Buck jumped swiftly back to Thorgon's side. Lovingly he nipped his tentacles in farewell. Then he nudged the body down-slope into a pond so that no wolf-fleas should feast on his dead master. Thorgon lay heavily on the bottom of the pool, only his trunk rising up to the surface, beaded with bubbles of air.

For an hour Buck drank from the savages he had killed.

Then he leapt high into the air,

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heavy though he was with blood. He leapt so high it seemed he might have landed on a star. For he had killed Zog, the noblest prey of all.

As he was coming down, a pack of wolf-fleas jumped into the valley, attracted by the scent of blood. As soon as he landed, they challenged him — and very soon the pack leader lay dead and the other wolf-fleas were licking each other's wounds.

From their midst hopped the very same wolf-flea that he had jumped with on that madly restless day not so long ago. She bent her neck beneath his mouth, and when he had nipped her once, accepting her homage, she threw back her head and howled at the three moons.

The whole pack howled in chorus, and Buck howled loudest of them all (though a flea howl is not very loud, except to other fleas). The only surviving Zog was far away by now, but a spectator would have seen all the fleas dance, then, leaping time and again towards those ivory moons.

At last, led now by Buck, the pack jumped out of the valley, And with that leader's leap, away from the watery grave of the Zog he had loved almost beyond sanity, Buck Flea was free. And wild.

In future years, even though every savage Zog kept well clear of the Valley of the Evil Flea (to which Buck alone returned, once a year in the springtime), their camps would be cunningly raided and their lookouts left drained of their blood, with flea dirt all around them.

Sometimes the savages would see, leaping through the distant sky, one flea larger than any wolf-flea jumping higher than they could have believed possible. They would pull their trunks in and shuffle all four feet in fear.

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Books

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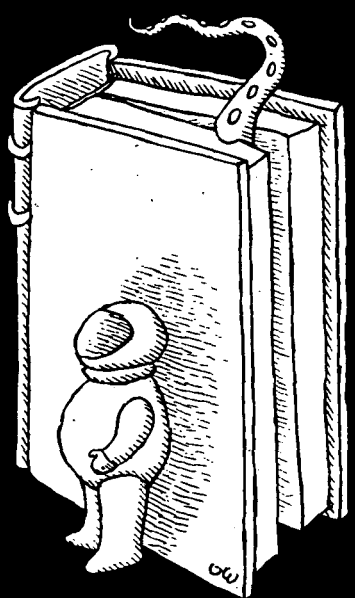

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

The Many-Colored Land, Julian May, Houghton Mifflin, $12.95.

Many of you out there in Readerland possess a close acquaintance with the world of Fandom. But if F&SF's readership is anything like what I picture when I peer out at you from my basement window, many of you do not. Some of you have never even heard of it. Whether you know it or not, that has affected your SF reading. And so a brief introductory discussion precedes this month's book review, and perhaps even the more sophisticated among us will profit from it.

No one can be certain of why there are Fans.* A number of plausible theories exist. Mine are the correct ones, but other observers of the SF scene offer differing hypotheses which they stubbornly refuse to abandon. The important thing for our present purposes is that SF supports a very large community of individuals who draw their principal psychic energy from the community — ie., Fandom — rather than from the literature around which it coalesced in the late 1920s. For many people — thousands; tens of thousands, ranging in age from the single-digit numbers on up through Nonagenaria — Fandom is a way of life. Even those who insist that Fandom is

** The time has come to begin using the term as a proper noun, since a specific interest in SF is meant when distinguishing between Fans and fans in the generic sense of persons who simply have a liking for something.*

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just a God-damned hobby must enter that community, and adopt its mores and idioms, in order to communicate that opinion.

The thing that must be grasped, incredible as it may seem to the uninitiated, is that Fandom represents the most prominent instance in all world literature of a reader-generated, positively acting, organized (though not single-minded), effective force whose effect is to condition its literateurs from birth. In some cases, some SF stories cannot be fully understood except by Fans, and while that is an extreme case it is a frequent case, and growing more frequent.

At first glance some may think that even if true this is no more than a microcosm of what literacy in general accomplishes, in ensuring that writers are replaced as they run out their careers, and that any given generation of writers for the most part reflects the cultural biases of its own time. But the difference is sharply more qualitative than it is quantitative. It is more nearly as if, for instance, the island of Trinidad traditionally fostered nearly all the writers who would supply the next generation of all writing for English-speaking people everywhere.

Fandom is in many ways as attractive a place as Trinidad can be, and its inhabitants are sharply engaged with the universe at large. It is one of their principal tenets that one cannot be a good member of the culture without taking an inordinately deep interest in aspects of art and science, and a far broader than usual interest in the world in general. But it is, nevertheless, an enclave risen from the days when "science fiction" and "fantasy" were circumscribed popular literatures promulagated by ephemeral media. From about 1940 until quite recently, it was *the* source of new SF writers, artists, and editors, who typically first served an apprenticeship in the very large and proliferated Fannish amateur publishing establishment ... itself a phenomenon without significant parallel.

Fans are incessantly in communication with each other, through these media, by private correspondence, or face-to-face in groups ranging in size from the carful of visitors on up through the local and regional convention to the national and world conventions whose attendances routinely attain several thousand. They communicate about everything under the Sun. Some no longer read SF, having burned out on it but not on Fandom. They are a singularly unorganizable culture — even the conventions are created by ad hoc groups which, essentially, form for that purpose and dissolve afterward. There is no central organizing body, no hierarchical process of any great note or endurance, but obviously at any given time there will be an unspoken but feelable consensus whose general import is detected in the bones.

Thus, as you might expect, there are a secret language and a body of tra-

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dition, both nurtured by the Fannish publishing establishment and then disseminated in person-to-person contact as older Fans encounter and indoctrinate newer ones.

The core of the secret language lies not in the nonce-words and thieves' language whose existence is apparent to any observer and is frequently flaunted. It is in the Fannish use of perfectly ordinary terms. "Mundane," to take the most obvious example, is pejorative when used by literati in general. In Fannish, it simply means "not related to SF," usually a far more neutral connotation, if a revealing one. Few professional SF writers, well aware that the bulk of their audience does not speak it, use blatantly Fannish words in their work. But few professional SF writers are as scrupulously aware of the large body of connotative Fannish concealed within the mundane portions of their vocabularies, and a fair measure of that does get through into the text.

Still, it's the Fannish traditions that most influence SF, most notably by preserving certain favorite icons. To the extent that this is not knowable to non-Fan readers, its reflection in the reading can be both puzzling and not accessible to unaided rational analysis. You cannot see to find your glasses because your glasses are lost.

Passages within books, and books within a canon, and canons within the field, may then seem oddly motivated and out of focus. Books which have received critical acclaim, award-winning books, and new books already bearing lavish advance endorsements from respected SF personalities, can seem plainly undeserving of such encomia when one applies reasonable, ordinary and reliable critical standards learned from general literature. Conversely, an SF book which has been largely ignored, or castigated, may seem on reading it to have been treated with manifest unfairness.

I bring all this up because we're about to look at a piece of work I think will prove an apt example of this phenomenon. I feel it's important to bring up because by far the most frequent conversation that occurs whenever I meet a non-Fannish reader of this column centers around this species of puzzlement. I've been looking for an opportunity to move the discussion out to where it is accessible to us all at once.

The manner in which these conversations are usually initiated is with a sincere question about whether the award committees, the contributors of the book-jacket endorsements, and some of my fellow reviewers are venal or just stupid. I believe this is an attempt to flatter me by implication — an attempt that always makes me squirm, for all that I don't mind feeling like an unusually perceptive and rectitudinous fellow. And, yes, since the opportunities in Sf to express a literary opinion of some kind are open to many, and frequent, a certain percent-

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age of corrupt performance must exist. When I think I have detected some of that, I twit it with great satisfaction while keeping my fingers crossed that I'm not being stupid or prejudiced in that particular instance. But I hope that the foregoing passages have contained the materials of a less invidious explanation, and furthermore of the explanation that applies most accurately in the greatest number of such instances.*

All right, what are the signatures of Fandom?

Let us look at Julian May's *The Many-Colored Land*, an enjoyable book, and see what there is in it to enjoy; but let us also look at the literary choices the author made, and how many other sorts of book might have occurred.

The Guderian Effect, discovered some centuries in the future, is a means of opening a one-way portal to the Pliocene Era, a geological epoch in Earth's past when the climate was equable, mammals — including early hominids, but not true humans — had appeared and proliferated, and, according to some paleontologists but not all, the Earth was as near Eden as it has ever gotten. Doctor Guderian's rather small and immovable portal on this past, operated from his cottage in France, can trap things — an eohippus, for instance — and bring them forward across the millions of years into his cottage. But unfortunately they age through every one of the intervening years, so that what arrives are the molecules left over after the fossilized bones of the eohippus have disintegrated.

This is the point at which an author like James P. Hogan, for example, who is characteristically Nulleff — non-Fannish — would have exploited the obvious fact that the field from Guderian's effect could not really be so discrete; it would take not only the animal, but a hemispherical or hemilobal portion of the sod under its hooves and the soil under the sod. From a Pliocene point of view, it would be a disintegrator ray of mysterious origins and unknown limitations. Hogan's resulting "hard science" novel would revolve around that idea. But Julian May is a Fan, of very long standing, once deeply involved in the Fannish community and such signature activities as the writing of Fannish verses to Sulli-

** Incidentally, and alas all systems, I have always conducted my criticisms from a complex and partially intuitive base. Most of the time, I proceed as if addressing literate ladies and gentlemen whose interest in SF is the most reasoned of all the SF magazine readerships', and whose appreciation of traditional literary values is high and informed. I do not assume any "inside" viewpoint on their part.*

Some of the time, however, when dealing with a book whose chief validity lies in its connections with traditional magazine "science fiction" and the kind of "fantasy" found in magazines sister to science fiction magazines, I will concentrate on Fannish aspects.

And some of the time the Devil just gets into me.

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van melodies, her subsequent scientific career and credentials notwithstanding. So at the same time that she devotes much attention to making her Pliocene verisimilitudinous, she sketches the physics of Guderian's machine. They are detailed only to the extent required to establish that it cannot be used to return, should one choose to use it to enter the Pliocene. This can be done without growing millions of years younger, as is repeatedly demonstrated by the people who, over the years, now for various reasons begin passing through the portal.

The portal — the stargate, the massive doors of the forbidding castle, the path between the worlds, the matter-transmitter — is an icon of central stature in SF. Perhaps there is no direct correlation between the frequency of its appearance in our literature and the fact that many who enter Fandom do so while in the throes of pubescence. But perhaps there is.

In May's novel, the cast of these many voluntary exiles is considerably varied. Some are failed careerists, some are simply mad, some are motivated by love or lost love, one is a young woman acccidentally deprived of her telepathic powers, one is a recently widowed ageing scientist who cannot endure continued life in an environment full of reminders, one is a nun in spiritual crisis, and one is even Guderian's widow, moved at last to share the unknown fate of the many people she has been sending through the portal. Here is the *Bridge of San Luis Rey* again, but with the SF-added dimension that the explorable question is not Why did these people die? It is How will they live? Many a novelist in and out of SF could proceed from there to explore the interactions of these characters, given on the one hand a sentence of absolute removal from their habituated lives and on the other a clean slate.

But this is not allowed to play out as an unhindered process. The Pliocene unexpectedly turns out to be populated by members of an alien race from another galaxy, whose women have breasts that hang to their waists and who enslave all the humans as they come through the portal.

It is too much cocktail-party Freudianism to simply call this a disguised child's-eye view of the world. It is anyone's view of the world, expressed within very limited parameters whose crudity is the crudity of those limitations, not of the concept toward which that particular vocabulary is directed. Julian May is at this point a mature individual for whom a great deal of life and work has intervened since her famous 1951 novella, "Dune Roller." But there is no question in my mind that the presence of this almost omnipotent, capricious and conditionally human race beyond the portal, with its cruelties far overshadowing whatever wisdom and beauty it might also offer, constitutes a particularly attractive feature in many Fannish eyes. From a

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purely literary point of view, of course, it is an intrusion on the potential elegance and clean line of extrapolation offered by the uncluttered situation first presented by the Guderian effect.

Whatever prospects May had of writing a great book were not crucially compromised until the appearance of the aliens. But such an appraisal presumes that May at some point wanted to attempt a great — ie., directly penetrating, obfuscation-killing — book. All the evidence instead indicates that she wanted from the beginning to write a sprawling, proliferated "epic" — that is, a story with many sub-plots not directly bearing on the inner lives of the central characters, containing a fair number of events which exist essentially for their own sake as set-pieces modeled on similar events in earlier well-received SF novels; an entertaining book.* Nor blushed to do so. Nor, I hasten to stress, ought to have blushed. We are discussing choices here, not transgressions.

The remainder of the novel — a sufficiently self-contained Part One of a two-part epic of "The Pliocene Exile" —is best read as a physical contention for mastery of the domain beyond the portal. Individuals can, do, and have escaped from their masters, gathered as rebel bands in the outlying forests and mountains, and made alliances among themselves. They have also made variously trustworthy alliances with a spectrum of subsidiary alien races other than the main one. (These are actually other aspects of the one alien race, which is not as straightforward in its corporealizations as our own is). In due course, they gather the physical resources to strike the first blow of what will be a long campaign.

Here is where the independent subplots occur most thickly. In a literarily gratuitous but Fannishly potent stratagem, May is weaving the structure of a "rational" explanation for the legends of fairies, kobolds, leprechauns, werepeople, fey Celtics, and even possibly of UFOs, that will somehow penetrate the massive intervention of Ice Ages and persist into our own time. Here again, in attempting to account for every fantasy manifestation ever known, May is forced to digress from a fairly concentrated premise — the one alien race — into a diffuse one.

She also appears to be getting ready to account for Neanderthal Man and the Cro-Magnons; it's as if she felt unable to journey into just one past, but instead felt obliged to tour her own Fannish awareness of every icon that has ever existed in the rather large body of Sf devoted to prehistorical mi-

* *And thus, incidentally, far more likely to be an immediately popular book, but more important a book the author found it enjoyable to write and to contemplate the daily writing of. The need to maintain one's own elan in the face of doing a thousand words a day, day after day, when one is unaccustomed to the lifelong routines of the professional writer, also conditions many a Fannish novel.*

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lieux. She repeatedly asserts that the Pliocene cannot in any meaningful way be connected to our own time, which is rationally true, but in her heart she feels otherwise. Which is, perhaps by coincidence, exactly how Fandom would want her to feel.

With so much physical activity going on — battles, skirmishes, escapes, rapes, confrontations — this book could readily have become simply another compendium of hugger-mugger punctuated by brief lectures, a mode not unknown to faithful readers of the old Ace double-novel or, for that matter, of most of the present-day SF product of fringe imprints such as Zebra and Pinnacle. But another Fannish requirement comes into play here. Fans as a matter of fact have a considerable contempt for the mere action novel, dismissing it as juvenile and mindless. A novel of action, in Fannish eyes, can be worthy of serious attention only if it displays obvious mindedness. One frequent representation of mindedness is precisely the sort of rationalization May employs in scrupulously proposing a "scientific" basis for supernatural legend. Another is "character development."

It is a requirement of the Fannish SF novel that the characters "grow" — that is, display the results of a capacity to learn life's lessons. This is a particularly stringent requirement, reflected in Fannish critical articulations as well as in Fannish lists of work regarded with special approval. A list of Hugo winners, for example, or to some extent winners of the putatively non-Fannish Nebula Award, and particularly of work which appears on the award nomination lists at the behest of nominators with relatively sparse professional credentials, will reveal that over the years the one sort of story that almost never makes it is the story in which no one "learns better." I am also here to assert my opinion that, by and large, the story in which the process of learning better is particularly visible and particularly easy to express as a homily is the story that stands the best chance.

Homiletics of course is the residue of experience. There is something to be said for the incessant stream of memorizable axioms that constitute the bulk of human educational material, since each represents the core of some initially complex and tumultous process of human trial-and-error that had to be worked out over decades, centuries, and eventually millennia. Such aphorisms as "A rolling stone gathers no moss" or "A stitch in time saves nine" are the result of what must have been very extended processes of observation, and for that matter are still being cross-checked against observed data every day. There must have been a time when they were less refined; when their prototypes were expressed as "Wandering around is bad" and "You'd better tuck-point that wall."

Any number of homilies are still at that prototypical stage, and a case

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might be made for an assertion that it's particularly the still imprecise and less helpfully expressed homily-situations that define the area in which Fannish SF — Effseff? — works. Effseff is notably fond of scenarios testing such propositions as "You shouldn't bottle-up anger," "You'd better be sure what you're sure of," "Pride creates mistakes," and any number of other such variously profound open-ended statements which are in the same relationship to a fully-formed aphorism as the *Reader's Digest* is to a good encyclopedia.

This is natural enough. The Fannish community in its articulations has always displayed an energetic predilection for testing the latest in intellectualization, a process usually described as "being at the forefront of human thought." What this means is that Fans tend to become engaged with the least precisely formed proto-aphorisms because they have caught them early in their development. Nulleff SF is not free of this trait, either, but it is particularly exaggerated in Effseff.*

Since such imprecise maxims are what the protagonist in an Effseff situation must work *toward* discovering, and since dramatic values first require that there be an extended intervening process of trial-and-error—to validate by its effortfullness the viability of the climactic proposition — this forces a peculiar constraint. When first encountered, Effseff protagonists can often seem particularly limited and unperceptive, since even where they get to is often a rather elementary and circumscribed enlightenment.

It would take a writer of first-rate genius to create a transcendent Effseff novel, since that writer would have to produce a genuinely formed, first-rate aphorism, with self-evident applicability to the human condition, that thousands of articulate and intelligent Fans had not already thought of, but were sufficiently developed intellectually to understand at once. That is a very tall order, since all of SF contains no more first-rate geniuses at any given time than any other literature does — that is, some number statistically quite near zero.

Which is a long and weighty way 'round to characterizing the characterization in *The Many-Colored Land*, a novel which, by the way, is gaining enthusiastic reviews in the Fannish media, with fervent declarations that its stature and potential are comparable to those of *The Lord of the Rings*, The *Foundation* Trilogy, and the Lensman series — to name three creations that have few literary mutualities with each other or the May novel, but which are at about the same point on the Fannish scale of adulability.

* *Ah, secret languages growing before our very eyes! Were we to continue this trend here, a few months would suffice to make this column totally incomprehensible to newcomers. Wouldn't we feel proud and good and cozy?*

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Some such otherwise inexplicable comparison will almost certainly appear in the selling copy blurbed upon the covers of the eventual paperback reprint. And so those of you who did not previously possess a key to the logic of SF blurbing now have one.

Now, mind you — as we lumber toward my conclusion here — while I have struck hard and deeply at some of Fandom's most cherished tenets; or, far more precisely, while I have re-expressed some of those tenets in language that seemed more useful, without even once passing judgment upon the institutions represented by that language — Julian May's novel remains an enjoyable book. It is a careful and sapient construct, by someone who for all that she is not a professional writer certainly could be a rather good one if she chose to abandon her other careers.* It is a page-turner on an intelligent level, and some of the characters are notably easy to take into one's acquaintance, for all that even the oldest of them does not seem to have lived very much or thought about life with the depth one might expect. It is written in a lucid style — for all that its construction also caters to the Fannish liking for the cryptic prologue, supposed to whet the Effseff reading appetite but sometimes giving Nulleff readers the sensation of forging through a dark room thick with cobwebs. It is not only an enjoyable but a trustworthy book; May proliferates her theses, but she never cheats; there is a Fannish taboo against proffering intellectual constructs without concluding them, which is more than the Nulleff milieu can say.

So we have come a long way here, and employed a tone not usual even to this journal; I crave your pardon if you would much rather have had the mixture as before. It shall return promptly and any future excursions will be infrequent. But it seemed to me we had a unique opportunity here to discuss some things that might have value for you. And I say, again, that the opportunity is unique not because I haven't had all this thinking on tap and ready for expression at almost any time, but because *The Many-Colored Land* seems to me to be a book which signally rewards both the Nulleff and the Effseff reader, for all that it does not reward them each in the same way.

** In SF generally, the distinction between the amateur and the professional is far more often than not a distinction in career-choice, not in talent or skill. In all of literature, there are actually very few full-time writers who do nothing else in the sense that writers of advertising copy do nothing else. It may reflect my own parochialism when I say that it seems to be truer in Sf than elsewhere.*

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Keith Roberts wrote "The Checkout" (February 1981), and "The Lordly Ones" (March 1980). His new story begins as a drama about the most ordinary sort of family, and it ends on the far side of one of fantasy's classic themes.

Kaeti's Nights

BY

KEITH ROBERTS

This isn't one of Kaeti's nights. So I can get a bit of work done.

Wind's getting up again, blustering round the pub. Sign starting to creak a bit in the big gusts. That means Force Eight, Nine. We've got our own Beaufort scale here. Raining again too, hard. Hear it rattle on the windows. Been a funny old year for weather. Trees didn't drop their leaves till near on Christmas. Fields were still green too. Vivid. Sort of sickly.

Just seen to Chota, got her her bits. Saucer of milk and that. Funny little beggar. Born the wrong side of the door, I reckon. Any door. Some cats are like that. I never thought Kaeti would rear her. She did though. Kept on. Even after we'd all written her off. Even her Mum. Used to come back midmornings, give her her feed. Never knew how she got away with it. That's Kaeti though.

Kaeti's my daughter. She's dead, by the way. Just three weeks before Christmas, it was.

Funny. Me writing. Not my sort of thing at all. Couldn't see the point at first. Kaeti explained all that though. About actions. Said we weren't *supposed* to see the point. None of us. She said — let's get this right — she said what matters about actions is just that they're *done*. She said if she, well, spilled a glass of milk or scratched her knee or anything, anything at all, then it was always true it was *going* to happen. At that place, and at that point of time. Very particular about that she was. Because there are other Points, apart from those in Time. She said it was always true it *would* happen, no matter how many millions of years you went back. And it would always be true it *had* happened, no matter how far you went forward. Something

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about going on from where Gotama stopped. Sitting right across from me she was, curled up on the settee. And looking solemn, solemn as I'd ever seen her. She'd lost me a bit by then. She said that didn't matter though, nobody could get it all first time off. What mattered was that I believed. Another sort of belief. Something quite new.

She talked a lot about Time. Said you could *feel* it passing, if you tried. The minutes, all the seconds in 'em, all those actions going on, getting themselves recorded. Building something that was huge and getting bigger, something that could never be stopped or hurt. It doesn't *need* us, it never needed us. But we all belong to it. She said it was called the One, that everything belongs to it. The atoms in a chair leg, all whistling about. They're Events as well. Sometimes one explodes, and that's a Nova. She said to read the neo-Platonists, they knew a bit about it. I wondered where she'd had time for stuff like that. I thought Sixth Form College was nothing but skiving and Business English.

Doesn't make sense? That isn't important. Not really. Because it makes sense to me. Just in flashes. When a pendulum swings, there's shadows. Like those trick titles you see now on the Box. Some are in the future, some are in the past.

It's the bar clock I can hear. The big one in the saloon. Funny how you can hear it right up here. Sort of trick of the building.

Came from Pete's Dad's place, that clock did. His pride and joy. Parliament clocks, they call them. Go back to the days when some silly blighter put a tax on timepieces. Seems governments weren't any smarter then. All that happened was they all chucked their clocks out, had one thundering great big thing everybody could see. Worth a packet these days. That bent little sod from the brewery offered me two hundred cash to knock it off the inventory. He must have been joking.

That's another funny idea. *Worth*. Value, price. If you knew the half of what I do — but maybe you will one day. If you get the time.

Looked in on Pete on the way up. She's asleep. Real sleep, not that halfway, floating stuff you get from pills. Hair spread on the pillow, looks about twenty. As if the years don't matter. But they don't, not really. That's what's so bloody marvelous. They don't matter at all.

Asked Kaeti what I should write *about*. She just grinned though. "Anything," she said. "You, Mum. The pub. It's all Actions. Anything you like." So I'll start with me.

I wasn't born in these parts. London, that's where I hail from. The Smoke. Only they shifted me out. Five or six I was, and the Blitz just really starting to warm up.

Funny how clear some of it still is. The sirens going and us trailing out from school, lining up in the yard. Then down the shelters, shoving and

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pushing, and the whistles going and all us with the gasmasks on our shoulders. We used to sit sometimes and hope there'd be a raid. Like holidays they were. Half days off, courtesy of old Adolf. We didn't know of course. Not really. Bombs don't mean anything to kids. They're just something that happens on the films.

I remember the shelters too. Lines of slatted seats, and the voices everywhere. Puddles on the floor, and that stink there always was of wet cement. And the lamps in their wellglasses, lines and lines of little yellow bulbs. Funny, thinking back. The school was a damned sight better built than those bloody shelters, we'd have been better off staying where we were.

That's what my old man reckoned. We'd got an Anderson out the back, they all had. Only, we only ever used ours the once. After that, if there was a raid on, he'd sit downstairs with his mates and just play cards. You'd hear the rumble of voices and the laughing. Sounded louder than the bombs sometimes. They'd always get me up though, make me dress. I'd got a siren suit made out of bright blue blankets, just like old Churchill. They'd get me into it and zip the front, then Jerry could do what he bloody liked. That was all we bothered.

I was only ever really scared once. And that wasn't at anything that could hurt. Typical. Mam put the bedroom light out one night and opened the curtains and took me to the window. "Look, Bill," she said, "we'll be all right now. It's the *serchlie!*" I didn't know what she meant, not to start with. Then I saw these two beams of misty blue, reaching up there miles across the housetops, and for some reason, God knows why, they looked like horns on the head of a bloody great ghost. Then they swung and dipped, and I knew the *serchlie* was nosing about looking for me and started yelling the place down. Poor old Mam, she never did understand it. They tied the labels on our coats next morning and shipped us out. Evacuation, they called it. Sis kept bawling but I was just glad I was getting out, where the *serchlie* couldn't get me. Ghosts were a lot worse than bombs. That's where we all went wrong of course, years and years ago. Teaching kids a load of muck like that.

That's how I got to Blackwell the first time. Blackwell, Hants. Just over the border, on the edge of the big common. Queer little place it is. Not much to it, not even a church. Just little redbrick cottages scattered about and a couple of pubs, and the lane up to the farm. There's one big house, at the other end of the village. That's where we all stayed. The Stantons have got it now, had it for years, but in those days it was owned by an old biddy called Olivia Devenish. Left over from the Raj, she was. Indian stuff all stood about, and a big old overgrown garden that even had canebrakes in it. You could play lions and tigers through

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there a treat. Or Spitfires and Messerschmitts. We did too, me and Sis and about a dozen more. Right little perishers, we were. Mrs. Devenish never bothered though, just sat in the middle of it all and mended socks and clipped ears when she had to. I reckon that was her War Effort. Auntie we called her, and we all got on fine. Knew when to stop of course. Not like these days.

It was a bit queer to start with, green fields all over and the birds every morning. Most of us never took to it. I know Sis didn't, she was off back to London first chance she got. It suited me though somehow. They'd got ack-ack guns on the common then, and a searchlight unit. I knew what they were by then of course. Used to hang round every chance I got, scrounge off the soldiers. Got to be a sort of company mascot in the end. Even had my picture in the paper once, sitting at one of the guns complete with oversize tin hat. Plus some bloody drivel about the next generation and Building for the Future. Still got it somewhere.

Nobody ever bombed Blackwell though; and after a while the unit was moved out. It was real quiet after that.

I could have gone back, I suppose. A lot of them did. I probably would have if I'd had the chance. But Dad always said no, not till they blew the whistle. Reckoned Jerry had still got some stuff left up his sleeve. As it turned out, he was right. V-2 it was, took the whole row out. The war finished a few weeks later.

I lived with Auntie May and her lot till I finished school. I got myself a garage apprenticeship then. Used to hang round Douggie Caswell's old place in the village, I'd got used to the smell of motor oil. After that it was national service of course. For some reason they decided I wasn't quite A-1 so it was the pay corps and like it. Two years counting piasters, watching camels float down the Sweetwater bloody Canal. When I got back to London, there was nothing to stay for any more. What mates I'd had had all drifted off; Sis had married and moved out, damn near to Epping, and the Council had really got their teeth into our neighborhood. I reckon they finished Jerry's job for him. All the stuff he hadn't had a go at, they did. My old man would have turned in his grave. If he'd ever had one. Auntie was slated for a high-rise block, and there wouldn't have been room for me even if I'd wanted to go. That's how I turned up again one bright day in Blackwell. I've been here ever since.

Always liked the common. Not that there's all that much to see. Just flat ground, undulating a bit, the tussocky grass, big stands of gorse and bramble. Swarms with adders in the summer, the cottage hospital always used to keep the serum. Lazy little beggars, bite rather than move, the kids would step straight on 'em. Autumn's the time to see it though. Autumn, and early winter. It sort of comes into its own then. The pub fronts it square-on,

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you can see the mist lie on it like milk, the humps and bushes sticking up out of it dark. The mist's nearly always there, hanging low. Till the wind gets up and shreds it. They say it's to do with the subsoil. Which I suppose is as good a story as the next. Sometimes it comes creeping across the road, big blue tongues that push out sudden, no more than a foot or two off the ground. It was a night like that old Teddy saw the ghost. Tall swirling pillar it was, come squirting straight out the ground. I can remember him saying it. "Swirling," he kept on saying. "Swirling, it was." Took half a bottle of Scotch to set him to rights. But Teddy was an old trooper, sarn't-major farrier in the Bengal Lancers. Never needed much in the way of excuses at the best of times.

I first met Pete on the common. I used to walk there whenever I had the time. Which wasn't all that often. I was working for Douggie Caswell then, been with him getting on four years. He was at the garage all hours himself so if an urgent job came in, which they often did, I never bothered much about staying on as well. Not much else to do in Blackwell anyway. But I used to stroll that way when I could. You could still see the pads where they stood the anti-aircraft guns, and close by were some concrete bunkers they'd never got round to knocking down. Even some rusty coils of wire, with the weeds all growing through them. I'd sit and smoke a fag and think about the old times. Mam and Dad, what he'd have made of it all. I suppose I'd turned into a bit of a loner. I was like it in the mob, they always reckoned I was a funny sort of blighter. Even for a Londoner.

Pete was a bit the same. Though to start with I never realized why. She's got this scar on her face. Down one cheek and across her chin. Pulls her lip up one side, into a little pucker. Pony did it, when she was a nipper. Must have nearly split her in half, poor little devil. They'd make a better job of it now. But those days plastic surgery was something not even money could buy. Took us a war to really find out about that.

Funny, but that first time I never even noticed it. Maybe because she had a knack of keeping her face half turned away. She was very good at it too, never made it obvious. All I saw was this tall blonde piece in flat slippers and a belted mac, mooching along on her own. Her collar was turned up against the drizzle, her hands were rammed in her pockets. But, do you know, I fancied what I saw. When I finally did see the mark — well, it was just a part of her, wasn't it? It didn't worry me one little bit, not ever. I sometimes think I thought more of her because of it. But perhaps I'm funny that way.

Her Dad kept a ramshackle old pub the other side of Camberley. The Hoops, it was called. Been knocked down for years now, to make way for

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a by-pass. Her Mum was dead and there weren't any other kids, so Sunday afternoons were about the only free time she had. That's when we used to meet, up on the common. Meet, and just walk. Sometimes we'd talk, sometimes we wouldn't bother. I expect you'll think that's a funny sort of courtship. But then I never looked on it as courting. I don't think she did either. I'd tell her about Cairo and the army, and being in London in the war, and she'd come out with bits about herself. Her great grandparents were Norwegian, which was where she got her figure and her looks. Proud of it too, in a funny sort of way. She still spelled her name the same, "Petersen" with an "e." She hadn't got much of a life though. Just the pub really. Her Dad enjoyed the gout, he'd got pills for it but the awkward old blighter wouldn't take 'em. They didn't do much trade, not enough to run to bar help. So the nights he couldn't hobble, she'd got the place to run on her own. That's why I took to dropping in, latish sometimes, to do a bit of cellar work for them. Rack the barrels for tapping, get the empties into the yard. I suppose they got to rely on me. But we didn't think too much about that either.

It was over a year before I popped the question. Even then I don't think I would have, only I'd had just one or two over the odds. Christmas it was, they'd asked me over to stay, help out with the bars because for once they were going to be busy. Anyway, when we finally got the doors shut and the old man had tottered off for some kip, we just flopped out, both of us, either side the fire. Turkey was on, there wasn't anything else to do. We watched the windows bluing for a while; then she fetched another drink and we got to talking. She was really tired. I knew because she was rubbing the scar, a thing she never did. Sliding her fingers along it, touching at her lip.

I don't know why but I felt a sense of urgency. As if a moment was coming — an Event — that would never come again. Not ever, not in a thousand million years. I'd never imagined myself marrying anybody, let alone *asking*. I'd thought about it odd times, I suppose everybody does, but the image had just refused to form. But now I somehow knew it wouldn't wait. Every second was precious and they were rushing past faster and faster, all the while I sat. So I just came out with it. No time even to be scared.

I'll never forget the look on her face. "What?" she said. "What?" As if she hadn't heard right. So I said it again. Told her some other things as well, that had been waiting a very long time. They all came out in a rush. I wasn't any bloody capture, not for anybody. Let alone a girl like her. It was a cheek even to think about it, and I told her that as well.

She still looked sort of dazed. "Me?" she said. "Me?" I found out then what that silly little mark on her face

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had come to mean to her over the years. Because she grabbed my hand, pressed my fingers on it. "You'd be marrying this as well," she said. "This. Wake up every morning, have to look at it."

I knew I'd had too much then because I just got blazing mad. Not *at* her though. Sort of for her. "Yes," I said, "and aren't I the lucky one? Think of all the fun I'm going to have, trying to kiss it better."

She started laughing at that. Then she was crying, then we were both laughing again. "Why not?" she said. "Why bloody not?" Then I think we both went a bit mad. All that lot bottled up, then the cork came out the bubbly. Afterwards she said, "I love you, Bill, I love you," and I said, "I love you." Silly bloody words, aren't they? But words are all we've got. We lay and said them and said them and the radio was playing in the lounge because we hadn't turned it off, and there's a carol that still stands my back hairs straight on end. I was the King of Bethlehem that night, because I'd just been born; and she was the Queen.

We made part of the top floor of the Hoops into a flat. It wasn't ideal but there really wasn't anything else to do. Kaeti was born just over a year later. That wasn't a good time either. Pete got her second scar. Afterwards, she could never ever have any more.

They say it never rains but what it bloody pours. A few weeks later Douggie called me into his rabbit hutch of an office. I'd been expecting it. I'd lost a lot of hours, work was piling up, we were going to have to sort something out. It wasn't that though. He beat about the bush for a while, which wasn't like him; then he came out with it. He hadn't been feeling too good for a year or more; he'd been thinking it was time to call it quits. Now he'd had an offer he couldn't turn down. So he was selling up.

He'd started to look his age, I granted that. I'd seen it, so had one or two more. But the first thing in my mind was Pete and the kid. I said, "Who to?"

He looked away again. Finally he said, "Jacobsons." Then he looked back. He said, "I'm sorry about it, Bill, I know just how you feel. I feel the same. But that's the way it's got to be."

A by-word in the district, they were. Right crowd of Flash Harrys. Made it pay though, got a big place out on the A-30, couple more down Frimley way. Believed in fast turnover. Small profits, quick returns. Or so the saying goes. The fast turnover included staff. I couldn't imagine what they wanted our dump for. I found out fast enough though. First thing in was the time clock. Second was a smartyboots little manager. His main job was corner-cutting. If there was a fast way round anything, that was the way you took. Not sawdust in the axles, rubbish like that; they were far too smart. But some of the bits were bloody near as bad. There were four of us by then.

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Five including the foreman. Which naturally wasn't me. They extended the old workshop, pushed an ugly great prefab across what used to be the Waterfords' greenhouses. General consensus was, it spoiled the village. Which in fact it did. There are such things as planning authorities of course, but a bob or two in the right place always did work wonders.

Maybe I should have got out before I did. But jobs in my line weren't all that thick on the ground. I did prospect a couple, but I couldn't see myself being any better off. And it had to be local because Pete was tied to the pub. Her old man was worse than ever, in addition to which he'd started hitting the bottle. We'd had to take on a full-time girl, and another to cover her days off. The combined wages made a hefty dent in the family income. All in all, we'd got ourselves into a right bloody tangle.

I stood it for a year. Then Douggie rang one night with a proposition. I didn't fancy it at first. I'd never seen myself as a shopkeeper, I don't now. But the way he put it, it made sense. "You know the trade's changing, boy. It's not repairs any more, it's just replacements. You don't *do* any bloody engineering, one month's end to the next. Why not face facts?"

He'd got property all over, bought in the days when you could get a nice little cottage for a couple of hundred quid. Nice little shop it was too, just off Camberley High Street. Caswell Autospares. Did well right from the start, I was surprised. Leather steering wheels, poncy little car vacs; lot of stuff I wouldn't have bothered with myself. I always stopped short at Dolly Danglers though.

Funny, sometimes when you hit a bit of rough. It seems you cop for the lot. Then you get through it and it all goes smooth and straight and you know it's going to stay that way, for a little while at least. Though I expect Kaeti would have a smart answer for that as well. Something to do with Perception of Reality.

She was seven when we came up here. Right little tomboy, spitting image of her Mum. Darker coloring, but the same big grey-blue eyes. Her Grandad had been dead five years or more. We brought the big clock out and an old carved box full of family letters, and that was the last I wanted to see of the Hoops. We settled down to build the business up and make ourselves a home. The first real one we'd had.

Pete was over the other thing as well. About never having any more kids. It hit her hard to start with. She never said all that much, but I could tell. I knew she was over it when she stood in front of the mirror one night. "You know," she said, "I think it's working."

I couldn't think what she meant, not to start with. I said, "What's working?" and she grinned at me. She said, "What you told me that first night. It must be mind over matter."

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I'd been going through some of the papers and they'd given me an idea. "Pete," I said, "have you ever been home?"

"What?" she said. "I am home."

"No," I said, "I didn't mean that. I ment Norway."

It didn't sink in for a minute. Then her eyes started to change. She said, "We can't afford it."

"No," I said, "we can't. When shall we go?"

She didn't answer straight off. Just sort of swallowed. Then she said, "It'll have to be a ship. Grandad always said it had to be a ship."

And so a ship it was. Kaeti and Pete and me, all on a great big ship. And Norway?

It's funny, but it's a place where there's only Now. Because the winter's coming and it's dark, it lasts forever. So you live a marvelous, vivid Now. And there's the mountains, the huge mountains, and the sea. It's a place to be in love. On a ship, under the Midnight Sun.

Wind's dropped a bit. Rain's easing too. Put the light out just now, stood till my eyes got used to the dark. Nothing to see though. Dim gleam of the lane and the common stretching out, big humps of bushes. Nothing moving at all.

Douggie died in sixty-nine. I'd been expecting it but it still came as a shock. After all, I'd known him most of my life. I got a bigger shock a few days later though. He'd left us the shop. The lot, lock, stock and barrel. I knew there weren't any relatives, just a sister somewhere down Brighton way; but I still never expected that. About the same time the word went round the Greyhound would be changing hands, old Bill was going to retire. Good old boy he was, ex-copper. Had it since just after the War.

Pete grinned when I told her about it. She said, "Going to have a go then?"

"A go," I said, "what do you mean?" and she looked at me. "The pub," she said. "You know you want it."

I think my mouth must have dropped open. I *did* want it, I wanted it a lot, but till that minute I don't think I'd faced up to it. I said, "Haven't you seen enough of pubs?"

She started clearing away. "We're not talkng about me," she said. "We're talking about you."

"We're talking about both of us," I said. "You wouldn't want to go back into a pub, not after what you put up with."

She leaned on the table. "Look, Bill Fredericks," she said, "I've never told you what I want, one way or the other. So don't go putting words in my mouth." She looked thoughtful. "Matter of fact, I wouldn't mind running a pub," she said. "*Running* one. My way. And you could make that place go."

"But there's nothing up there," I

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said. "Only the village."

"There's the new estates," she said. "And that other one they started up Yately way. Came by the other day, there's people in already."

"They're no good," I said. "Up to here in mortgages. Anyway we couldn't afford it, the ingoing's bound to be sky high. It'd mean selling up."

She looked scornful. "Course it wouldn't," she said. "Get it off the bank, you've got collateral now. Then put somebody in here. I don't see how you could lose."

And that was the first time I realized Pete's got a far better business head than me.

I didn't think we stood much of a chance. Heard later they had twenty couples after it. But Pete got herself done up to kill and that was the end of it. Perhaps the brewery thought they owed her a favor.

I suppose the Greyhound isn't everybody's idea of a country pub. Big gaunt red-brick place it is, stands back on its own facing the common. Woodpaneled walls, vintage nineteen twenty, and the two big bars. There's more to it than meets the eye though. Had a horse in the Public one night, new pony from the riding school. Old Teddy's fault, that was. Little lass on board couldn't get it past; then he clicked to it and in it came for its ale. Reckoned later he could tell it was a beer drinker by the look in its eye. And there it was plunging about with the little lass looking distraught and Teddy up the corner having the croup. He got it back outside finally with the lure of a pint, after which of course it never would go by the pub. Used to have to hack along the other road.

Thursdays were the highlights. They were the barter nights; unspoken thing it was, among the locals. They'd all slope in, starting about eight, dump polythene sacks on the long bench just inside the door. Peas and beans, cabbages, onions and spuds, cauliflowers. Looked like a budding harvest festival sometimes. They'd have a pint or two apiece, not hurrying, then it would start. "Nice-looking collies you got there," Jesse Philips would say, and somebody else would take it up. "See your beans done all right then, Jesse." After a while the swap would be made, and that would set the tone for the rest. Peas would change place with cabbages, potatoes with onions, till everybody was suited. The incomers from the new estate cottoned after a while and tried to join in. But all they brought were bunches of flowers. Jesse Philips summed it up one night. "Can't eat bloody chrysanths," he said, after which they took the hint and tried for vegetables. But the new plots couldn't compete. The builders dumped the rubbish from the footings, they'd lost their topsoil. The ring closed up. They'd sell, at fair Camberley prices, but they would not trade. So Blackwell became two villages. We watched that happen as well.

We made our mistakes of course,

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like everybody else. But they weren't too serious. We kept the old trade and built on it. The lads from Jacobsons started dropping in when they heard I'd taken over. And there was the new place, the annex to the Agricultural College. Weekends they'd bring their wives and girlfriends, and so the word spread round. Sundays there were the trippers and hikers. We catered for them, forty or fifty at a time, so the word spread that way too. After the first couple of years we could afford bar help two or three nights a week, and we were taking holidays again. Never get rich, not from a pub like the Greyhound; but we were comfortable. And of course there was the shop as well.

I've heard people say bringing up teen-age boys is bloody murder. I wouldn't know. All I can say is, try bringing up a teen-age girl. I can't remember noticing the change as such, but suddenly it seemed we hadn't got a pretty little kid any more. Instead there was this gawky twelve- or thirteen-year-old, all knees and elbows and bloody bad temper. Tantrums every morning, tears every night. Or so it seemed to me. And never a reason for it, not that I could see. She'd got all the things most kids of her age want, but it was never enough. So-and-so had got this, somebody else had got that. Such-and-such was going on a school exchange to Germany, why couldn't she? So we sent her to Germany, though she didn't seem much better suited when she got back. Then it was a pony, she had to have a pony. Horses morning noon and night, six months or more. So we got her a pony, rented grazing from old Frank the diddy. The fad lasted another three or four months, after which she never went near. So there was trouble over that as well. Her mother got fed up in the end, sold the thing over her head. The row that followed was the best so far. I left them to it, opened up on my own. The public bar was beginning to seem more and more a haven of rest.

Then it was boys of course. First was young Davey Woodford from the farm. Nice enough kid in his way, but, oh Gawd, teen-age romance! "Wasn't you ever young, Mr. Fredericks," he asked me once. "Wasn't you ever *young*?" I'm afraid I made things worse, laughing the way I did. Course I was young, but I can't remember any episodes like that. Never had time, to start with. His age I was out in the bundu, counting bloody shekels.

Got worse rather than better when the thing with him blew up. She attracted 'em, from as far away as Frimley. Acted like a magnet. She was starting to be a looker, I granted that. But some of 'em weren't very wholesome types at all. I could see our nice clean reputation taking a sudden dive. That finished when her mother turned her out the bar one night. "Get upstairs," I heard her say, "you're not coming in here like that." After which there was a constant grinding of rock

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from her room till suppertime, at which we had the row to end all rows. That was also the first time in my life I saw Pete really lose her temper. She didn't stop at one either, she beat the daylights out of her.

I'll admit it, I got out. Made myself a John Collins, went and sat in the snug and had a smoke. There's something about voices raised in anger that I've always found chilling. Not so much the violence, the pointlessness. We act, sometimes, as if we're all immortal. It reminds me, or reminded me, of the shortness of life.

Pete came through about half an hour later, got herself a drink as well. She looked at me a minute, then came and put her hand on my shoulder. "Sorry," she said, "but it had to come. I wasn't being spoken to like that."

I said, "What's happened?" and she smiled. "Nothing," she said. "She'll be all right. She's gone to bed."

I said before, sometimes you seem to cop for the lot. Then you come through it and it all seems to sail along again. Just as suddenly, or so it seemed to me, Kaeti was a young woman. Taller than her mother, couple of inches with her heels on, and just as pretty. Same mannerisms, same turn of the head, same po-faced sense of humor. Like turning the clock back somehow. All the rest was behind her. She was smoking but not too much, she liked a drink, she was going to Sixth Form College. Knew just what she wanted and how to get it. Mornings when she had a free period, Pete would nip down to Camberley, have coffee with her there. They'd come back together. Two women, joking and laughing. Close. I suppose we were a family again. Though this time we didn't have very long to enjoy it.

April it was, when she first got ill. She'd been looking off-color for days; finally she didn't come down to breakfast. Said her throat was bad, she couldn't hardly swallow. Didn't clear up either. So finally I called Doc Jamieson. He came down shaking his head. Said it was thrush, first adult case he'd seen in years. He left her some stuff, but it didn't seem to do much for her. She was off a couple of weeks. When she finally went back she just seemed listless. Preoccupied. You'd speak to her, and odds she wouldn't answer. Sometimes have to speak two or three times, then she'd come round with a jump. But she wouldn't know what you'd said. The other thing was starting by then of course. But at the time we didn't realize.

It was the most perfect summer I can remember. Day after day cloudless, the nights warm, with the breeze bringing the scents in off the common. Made it even more ironic. Kaeti lying upstairs there, dozing or staring out at the sky. I rigged a television for her, put the control where she could reach it without moving her arm. But she never bothered with it. "I'm all right, Dad," she kept on saying. "Just a bit

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tired, that's all. Don't worry, I'll be all right." She wasn't all right though; she was far from all right. She looked bloodless somehow. Like a marble statue.

Doc Jamieson was worried as well. I could see that. Had a drink with me one night just before we opened. Said it was the listlessness that had got him bothered more than the rest. There wasn't much physically wrong at that stage. Touch of anemia certainly, but that did sometimes happen after a bad infection. He finally said he'd like her taken in for tests. Asked him what sort of tests but I might as well have saved my breath. Lawyers and accountants can both be vague enough when it suits their book. But the medical profession leaves 'em at the post.

I don't know how many tests she did have. We both lost count. They were all inconclusive. Or maybe there were too many conclusions. Agranulocytosis without ulceration. She'd got the experts thoroughly baffled as well. So I did a bit of reading for myself. Afterwards I wished I hadn't. There's a lot of words for it but they all add up to one thing. If it goes on long enough, the blood turns yellow-green, like pus. I still don't like to use the phrase they have for it. Even though I know by now they got it wrong.

The mist came back with the autumn. Long white tongues of it, creeping round the pub. Even then though she wouldn't have her windows closed. It was the only thing that roused her. The Doc shrugged finally and said to let it be. The rest was left unspoken but I had a horrible feeling I knew what it was. Nothing would do much harm now; she was past any help he thought he could give her.

The locals were very good. There were always things being left for her, jam, preserves, whole load of stuff. We'd got a cupboard full. Not that she ever touched it. Wasn't eating enough to keep a mouse alive. She'd ask sometimes how they all were, Jesse and old Teddy and the rest. And they'd ask after her of course. All except Frank Smith, which was odd. Funny little bloke he was, a lot of gypsies are. But he'd always been one of the most concerned. Till I told him, quite early on, there was a touch of anemia but the Doc thought she'd be fine. After that he didn't come in again. I didn't give it much thought for a couple of weeks; then I asked Jesse if he was bad. I thought he gave me a funny sort of look. He said no he was fine, been talking to him that morning in the village. Saw him myself a couple of times after that, out on his rounds, but he wouldn't speak. First time he looked the other way; second time he whipped the horse up. Which was a thing I'd never seen him do. His place was put up for sale a few days later; we didn't see him again.

Last thing they tried was x-ray treatment. I didn't like the idea of it, neither did Pete. But Kaeti just laughed. "That's all right," she said. "It

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won't matter, I shall be back for Christmas, you see." Funny, but she looked really perky. Sitting up with a woolly on, brighter than she'd been for weeks. Made a fuss about having all her bits and pieces, books to read and such. Even got her mother to do her hair. Two days later the hospital phoned. I knew it somehow before I picked the damned thing up. Our daughter was dead.

They all said afterwards how good we both were. You know, carrying on. It wasn't like that at all though; there was nothing good about it. When a thing like that happens, it turns all your ideas upside down. You carry on because you've got to. Would you mind telling me what else there is to do?

It was a big turnout. Sis came down of course, and Auntie May's lot, and some other cousins I hadn't seen for years. Plus the brewery outside manager, and nearly everybody from the pub.

It was raining. People always say it rains on days like that. And somehow it nearly always seems to. I don't remember very much else about it. I know I stared at the wreaths laid out on the grass and caught myself wondering what I was doing there. And there was a little chapel set among the graves; and a trolley with rubber-tired wheels that didn't squeak. That didn't get to me either though. It was like acting in a film somehow, it was nothing to do with us. Me and Pete and Kaeti. I was waiting for somebody with a megaphone to jump up and shout cut. Then we could all go home. But the film kept grinding on.

Sis stayed a fortnight, helped out with the bars. Then she had to get back. I didn't blame her. She'd already done more than most.

Hardest thing was convincing myself it had really happened. I knew I'd got to of course, but in a queer way I still couldn't believe it. Kaeti's life just stopping like that, a breath that went in and didn't come back out. And letting the box down on its webbings, and going home for tea. It couldn't be all there was to it; it just wasn't possible. So none of it had really happened; I was in some sort of dream. I kept trying to wake up but I couldn't. Coming to terms, they call it. What a bloody phrase. Though you can't blame them for that. Like I said before, words are all we've got.

Nights were the worst. I was tired and getting tireder, but I wasn't sleeping worth mentioning. I'd doze off sometimes toward dawn, get an hour or two. Then it was daylight, and I'd wake up and realize the dream was still going on and just want to go to sleep again, and sometimes I'd manage it. Then I'd be late for the dray or the Cash and Carry, and the bottling up wouldn't be done by opening time. I remember thinking sometimes it had to have an end. But there's never an end

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to anything. Any more than there's a beginning. We went to London for the Christmas, just one night. Then back again first thing to open up. Another year would be starting soon. That was beginnig to get to me as well.

Pete was worrying me too. The day after the funeral she stripped the display units in both bars, washed them down. The morning after she did it all again. And the morning after that. We always used to do them pretty often. You've got to, the smoke gets to them mirrors. But not every day God sent. Then she shampooed the carptets. Scrounged one of those big industrial units from a little bloke who used to come in now and then. After that it was the kitchen's turn. She scrubbed it down, walls, floor and ceiling. Then the upstairs bathroom. Then a load of paint arrived from the brewery. I thought the van driver looked a bit shifty. Turned out she'd fixed it without telling me. The upstairs had to be done up. All of it, right through. She started on it in the afternoons. Which meant she was working eighteen hour days. And she wasn't sleeping either.

I thought at least she'd leave Kaeti's room till last. She didn't though. Went up one day, found all her things parceled in heaps. Ready for the jumble. She just shrugged when I said about it. Asked what was the point of keeping them, they weren't any use to us. I said, "But, Pete," and she turned and looked at me. Nothing behind her eyes, not any more. They looked — well, sort of dead. So I didn't say anything else. But it still hurt plenty.

It had to end of course. Nobody can just keep on going like that, week after week. I was in the Public when it happened, talking to Jesse and one or two more. Dick Stanton had come down with his sister-in-law, the one who used to be an opera singer. I could hear his distinctive voice in the saloon. There was quite a crowd in, mostly youngsters from the college, but Pete had shoved me out. Said she could cope. So I left her to it. She was always better working on her own; we saw too much of each other the rest of the time.

I wasn't really registering the buzz of voices till it stopped. There was a crash then, like a bar stool going over. I half turned, and Pete was standing in the doorway. I've never seen a face like it. There's a phrase for it they use in lousy novels. *Blazing* white. Well, it was. She opened her mouth, sort of half pointed behind her, then she just crumpled. I jumped forward, but I was nowhere near quick enough. Bottles went flying, then Dick ran through. He said, "My God, Bill, what happened?"

We got her to the bedroom somehow, and his sister-in-law came up. I left them, ran to call the Doc. I thought she was a goner, straight. But by the time he arrived she was sitting up. Still looked pale as death but she swore she was all right, she just passed out. He left her some stuff, and I followed him down. "Doc," I said, "what's wrong?"

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He shook his head. Nothing, apparently, that he could find. He said, "How's she been? Since...."

I told him what had happened and he nodded. He said what I'd been thinking, that nobody could keep on indefinitely. It catches up with them. He said, "Can you get some help in?"

"Sure," I said, "George Swallow will always do an extra night. Glad of the cash."

He opened his car door. "Get him then," he said, "and try and keep her in bed. It would do you both good to get away for a few days. I'll look in again tomorrow." He drove off and I went back inside. Good bloke, is Doc Jamieson. After all, we were only ever NHS.

I got the bars closed finally and went upstairs. I thought she was asleep but she opened her eyes when she heard me. They were huge and dark. "No, Bill," she said, "I don't want no pills." She grabbed my wrist. She said, "Bill, I *saw* her...."

"What?" I said. "Saw who?"

She swallowed and tightened her grip. "Kaeti," she said. "She was in the bar...."

Things seemed to spin round a bit for me as well. I sat on the bed. "Look, Pete," I said, "you've got to face it. Kaeti's dead...."

She pushed her hair back. "You don't understand," she said. "I *saw* her, it *was* her. Don't you think I know my own daughter?"

I got her a bit more settled after a while and went back down. I got myself a stiff drink and sat and smoked a fag. I didn't know what to do. Or think. But I had to talk to somebody. Finally I rang Dick Stanton. He's always been a late bird. I didn't think he'd mind. He said at once, "How is she?"

I hesitated. I said, "She's fine, the Doc thinks she'll be OK. Just been overdoing it, you know what it's been like."

"Yes," he said, "I think I've got the picture."

I hesitated again. "Look, Dick, *did* anything happen? In the other bar? The way she came through...."

He didn't answer for a minute. I sensed he was puzzled as well. Finally he said, "Not that I saw. She was talking to us, seemed quite OK. Then suddenly ... it was as if she'd seen a ghost."

Level-headed man is Dick. I've always had a lot of time for him. And he knows how to keep his mouth shut. I swallowed and took the plunge. I said, "She did."

The phone said, "What?"

I said, "She thinks she saw our daughter. She saw Kaeti."

A pause. Then he said, "Just a minute." I stood and listened to the atmospherics on the line. They were bad that night. Like voices nearly, whispering and hissing. Finally he said, "Hello? You still there?"

"Look, Bill," he said, "there was one funny thing. There were some youngsters in, looked like students.

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Over in the far corner, I didn't pay 'em much attention. They'd just got up to leave. Jilly says there was a girl with them. Tall, brown-haired."

So that explained it.

"No," he said, "not quite. When Pete ran through like that, Jill went out after them. She thought they might have done some damage or nicked something. She was only a second or two behind. But there wasn't anybody outside. No cars moving either."

"What?" I said. "There must have been."

I could sense him shrugging. He said, "It's probably not important. Like you said, she just made a mistake. She's been under a lot of strain." Another pause. Then he said, "Look, Susan's at the college. My eldest. I'll get her to ask round on the quiet. See if anybody was there. If they remember."

"Thanks," I said, "thanks a lot. And, Dick ... keep it under your hat, will you? I wouldn't want it getting about."

He said, "I didn't hear a thing. Take it steady, Bill. I'm sure she'll be OK."

Oddly enough, for once I got a good night's sleep. When I woke up, Pete wasn't in the room. I ran downstairs but she wasn't in the pub either. I was just starting to get really worried when the side door clicked. She came in looking different somehow. Brighter. She said, "I went for a walk on the common. It's a lovely morning. I think spring's coming."

I've never seen anybody perk up the way she did. She went down to Camberley that same day, came back with an armful of flowers. She made up bowls for each of the bars, and one for the sitting room upstairs. When Doc Jamieson arrived she was dashing about like a two-year-old. He raised his eyebrows but he didn't say anything. I'd have given a lot to know what he was thinking though.

That night I heard her laughing in the saloon. Just like the old times. That hurt as well, deep down. She couldn't have forgotten Kaeti already. Not as quick as that.

She didn't touch her bedroom again. The fad seemed to have ended as quickly as it started. The clothes she'd sorted out had vanished, but I hadn't seen her take them anywhere. I slipped in on the quiet one morning. They were all back in the chest of drawers, and sprigs of lavender to keep them fresh. Apart from some she took down to the kitchen. She washed and ironed them, did some mending; then she put them with the rest.

She didn't stop the redecorating. Instead she worked harder than ever. Seemed to have got fresh strength from somewhere. I argued with her about it once, but she just smiled. "Got to have it looking nice,' she said. "Never know, somebody might come."

"Who?" I said. "There's only us." But she carried on regardless. So I got stuck in as well. It was April by the time we'd finished, nearly May. And

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the common brightening with the new spring grass.

I thought she'd forgotten our daughter. She hadn't though. Far from it. After we closed one night, I caught her taking a cup of tea upstairs. I asked her where she thought she was going and she grinned at me. "Where do you think?" she said. "It's for Kaeti."

I opened my mouth and shut it. Couldn't think of anything to say. Next day I made an excuse to go out, called on Doc Jamieson. After that the pills changed color. She said she didn't need them. She took them sometimes, when she couldn't get out of it, but most of the while she just flushed them down the loo. Those were the nights she took to wandering. I'd see the light on under Kaeti's door, hear her talking inside and laughing. I never interrupted her, because I couldn't face what was happening.

I won't say that was the worst part of all because it wasn't. But it did come near to being the last straw. She was in a private world of her own, somewhere I could never go. We were drifting apart as well, and there wasn't a single thing I could do.

It's been a funny old year for weather. Trees didn't drop their leaves till near on Christmas. Fields were still green too. Vivid. Sort of sickly.

The mist we sometimes used to get hung round right through the summer. Mostly by the pub. Jesse remarked on it more than once, said it was clear up by his place. Which was only a couple of hundred yards along the road. Teddy noticed it too. Only he wasn't coming in so much. He'd had a bad go of asthma; he said it played his chest up.

Used to sit and watch it sometimes. When I didn't fancy sleeping. Long tendrils, white as milk, and always moving. Flowing. Organic almost. I'd moved my desk into the sitting room, so I could hear if Pete got too restless. I'd finish the day's booking, then put the light out, just sit and smoke a cigarette and stare. Get hypnotized almost. Sometimes I'd doze. I'd always have bad dreams then. Only they weren't bad at the time. Just when I woke up. I'd be talking to Kaeti, remembering little things. All sorts of things. Then I'd sit up and the room would be empty again. Sometimes I'd think I could still hear her voice, that she was still there. Sitting across from me, curled on the settee. But it was only patches of moonlight on the wall.

Pete bought her a skipping rope once. Just after she started college. Kaeti swore she was getting fat, went on and on. I even dreamed about that.

Real jute it was, it said so on the carton. With handles made from old loom spindles. There was a booklet too, all about children's rhymes. It became her prize possession. She'd play with it for hours, up in her room. Clear all the stuff away first so she could get a good swing. The bumping and thumping would echo right through the pub. Like the old clock ticking.

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And you'd hear her chanting, getting steadily more out of breath. "Salt-mustard-vinegar-pepper, salt-mustard-vinegar-pepper...." Then an extra thump as she tried for the big one, four turns under, and usually a faint *"Damn-it...."* After which she'd start all over. Right nut case she was, I told her so more than once. But it never had any effect.

When I opened my eyes that time, I could still hear the scuff of her feet. Even the faint whistle of the rope. The sounds took ages to die away. When I went out onto the landing, the door of her room stood ajar, and the light was on again. I reached in, turned it off and pulled the door shut. I didn't look back, because if it came back on I would have to go and see. I did turn by our bedroom. The room had stayed dark of course.

Next night I was seeing to Chota. I'd got her her bits as usual, saucer of milk and that. She had a good drink, thought about the meat, then changed her mind and ran to the back door. "Oh, no," I said, "you can't want out this time of night." But she was mewing, scratching at the frame as if her life depended on it.

"All right," I said, "be quick then." I was wasting my breath though; I opened the door a few inches and she was through it like a streak and away.

I swore and went to fetch a torch. I walked outside and called but there was no sign of her. The mist was moving fast, streaming toward the pub. I flicked the torch about but it was useless, the beam just refracted back. I thought I heard her again somewhere ahead. I walked till I could see the common stretching out vague and blue-white. Then I heard the door slam shut behind me.

I gave up and went back. First thing I saw was the cat, finishing the saucer as if nothing had occurred. Ears laid back, really tucking in. I called her a few names under my breath, shot the bolts on the door and went upstairs. It was late but I didn't want to sleep. I went into the sitting room instead, sat down at my desk. I watched the mist flow in after me under the door. For some reason I wasn't really surprised.

There wasn't much of a crack but it had found it. It swirled round my ankles, spread across the room. Once I put my hand down to it. I expected it to feel cold but it didn't. Not much sensation from it at all.

More came, and more. There seemed no end to it. I thought for a while the room would fill right up. It didn't though. It was as if it was congealing somewhere, out of my line of sight. I watched the pattern on the carpet become visible again, heard the soft footsteps pad across the room. My old dressing gown was slung across a chair. I heard it rustle, then the steps came back. Finally I looked up. Kaeti was sitting on the settee with the dressing gown wrapped round her. It was too long by a foot or more. She said, "Hello, Dad." Then she smiled. She

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said, "You always was a gent."

My cigarettes were lying on the desk top. I picked the packet up and opened it. But I didn't really want it. So I put it back. When I looked up again she hadn't gone away. I said, "What's happening?" I don't know quite what I meant by that. Some sort of a time-slip idea I think.

She pushed her hair back. She said, "Don't tell me you didn't know." She got up, walked toward me. She said, "Hello" again and held her hands out. I took them. They were warm.

I said, "It is you, isn't it?" and she said, "Yes." Then she scotched on my lap, put her arms round my neck. She hadn't done that since she was about eight. She said, "I know it's a bit of a shock. But I did try and warn you. You must have heard me the other night."

I said, "I couldn't be sure." Then it got to me. "Kaeti," I said, "it was raining," and she said, "I know," and hugged me. "Don't, Dad," she said, "it's all right," and I said, "Kaeti, oh my God." We said a lot more then, the both of us, but I don't remember any of it. Neither did I care. I'd got her back, you see, I'd got my kid back. And she was warm.

Afterwards I said, "Kaeti, what about your mother," and she put her head back and laughed. "She knows, she said, "she's known for ages. We were only worried about breaking it to you." I did pull away a bit then because I'd seen the faint hypertrophy of the eyeteeth, the lovely little pearly fangs she'd grown. But she only laughed again. "Dad," she said, "you are a twit. I'm not going to *chumph* you, that's only on the films." She sat up then and looked at me solemnly. She said, "You look as if you need a drink. And I'd like something too, it don't half make you thirsty. Can I make some tea?"

I said, "Can you *drink*?" and she giggled. "What do you think I do," she said, "pour it in my ear?" She got up and I caught her hand. I said, "I'll get it," but she shook her head. "It's OK," she said. "You've been dashing about all day."

I still didn't want her out of my sight though. I stood outside her bedroom and waited. She came out pulling a woolly over her head. "I'm sorry about Mum," she said, "I gave her a right turn that first time; you'll have to make it up to her." I said, "I thought you'd killed her," and she turned back looking troubled. "I know," she said, "but there was nothing I could do. I had to stop her getting rid of all my things. I wouldn't have had anything left to wear...."

She put the kettle on, fetched the bottle of Paddy I keep for special occasions. Broke me up a bit that she'd remembered. She mashed the tea, stood the pot on a tray, then scooped Chota onto her shoulder. "Let's go back upstairs," she said, "it's warmer." And so we sat and talked, till there was grey light in the sky. And that was the

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first of Kaeti's nights.

Those teeth were the only thing that worried me. But that always sent her into fits. "Come on, Dad," she used to say, "they're kinky. Don't you think they suit me?" They did too, in a funny sort of way. Made her look, I don't know, like a healthy young animal. Which I suppose was what she'd always been. I think I was seeing things clearer. A lot of things. Hard to see straight, when you're trying to earn a living. Deal with bloody VAT and all the rest.

That's what I mean, about seeing straight. We had the VAT boys in a few days later. Played hell because I'd been supplying Dick with spirits by the crate; it had knocked my profit margin back a bit. Part of their job is keeping inflation on course though. Or perhaps you knew. There was a time when I'd have blown my stack. But not any more. I don't think I even listened very much; they were like radio static a long way off. All I could think of was Kaeti was coming back; it was going to be another of her Nights. Horses in blinkers, that's what we'd all been. Anger is for mortals.

She told me early on, the legend's wrong. Cocked up from start to finish. It's not what's taken from you, it's what they *give*. And they don't leave marks, any more than an acupuncture needle leaves a mark. "It's a sort of Contact really," she said. "It changes the flow. It all goes on from there...." I asked her what flow she meant, but she only grinned. "Ask a Chinaman," she said. "They knew a bit as well. Everybody knew bits. Even the bloke who wrote the book. But nobody ever got it all together." She pulled a face. "Then they found out about those grotty little bats in South America, the ones that bite the donkeys, and that was that. It's just a different lifestyle, Dad, that's all...."

It did take a little while to get used to. But that was OK too; she said I'd got a million years of prejudice to get rid of. Atavism, that was the word she used. Her vocabulary was going up by leaps and bounds; she'd left me standing. "Bashing saber-tooths over the head with hatchets," she said. "That's why you're scared of the night. It's the days you ought to be frightened of though really. That's when the bad things happen...."

Sometimes she'd come three or four nights together. Then we wouldn't see her for a week or more. She said there were long resting periods, there had to be; but she was never too clear about that. I don't think myself it was that at all. She was being considerate. After all, we'd still got the pub to run. It worried me a bit sometimes. Her not being there. I'd sit and stare out at the common and watch the rain and wonder what she was doing, where she was. But she put me right about that as well. "Look, Dad," she said, "if I'm not here with you I'm not *anywhere*. Well,

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nowhere you could understand just yet. What do you think I'm doing, running about getting soaked?" In any case, they don't experience Time the way we do. "I'm always here," she said to me once. "I never went away. Think of it like that...." Also, she warned me about Desire. It seemed a queer word somehow for her to use, but she didn't mean it quite the way I thought. "You mustn't *want* me to come every night," she said. "You mustn't *want* anything. Then I'll be here." That's what she meant, about going on from the Gotama. "He knew as well," she said. "They all knew really...." After that I'd go down to the kitchen afterwards and pick her clothes up where they'd fallen and bring them back upstairs and put them away and just not think of anything at all. I reckon I'd reached stage one of the Enlightenment.

She never let me see the transformation except for that first time. Not that there was anything horrible about it; she was very clear on that. It was just that there were certain things I wasn't ready for. And watching her turn to protoplasmic mist was one of them. "It might give you the wrong idea," she said. "You might start thinking about those grotty films again...."

That was funny too, coming from her. She always used to be a sucker for them. Even badgered us into getting a color telly so she could see the blood better. Gruesome little devil. But now it just seemed sad. I mean, that anybody had bothered with rubbish like that. "Think of a chrysalis," she told me once. "You crawl out on a branch and hang yourself up and squidge down into a sort of porridge. Then you wait a million seconds, and out you come a butterfly. Those were the things we should have been looking at...." It was one of her metaphors; she'd developed quite a knack for them. She was the butterfly now, riding high night.

I'll tell you what it was like. It was like being in love. I don't mean with *her*, that sort of thing. It was like the first time ever, waking up and seeing colors, the atoms of things vibrating. And knowing there are textures, your feet are pressing the ground, things are *real*. And you send up thanks. Not unto the Lord, that sort of stuff, just thanks. For being. That's when you see the One. Only there's gravity, it all falls away. And you can never get it back. I lived it every day though. Like a dream that didn't stop. I told her that too once, and she grabbed my hand. "That's *right*, Dad," she said. "You're coming on. Everything's a dream, they all knew that. Jesus, the Gotama, everybody. They're all One." I said, "*The* One?" and she nodded. "That's right," she said, "*The* One...."

They know so much more than us of course. They're *homo superior*, they have been all along. The next stage on. Only we got confused. Couldn't see the wood for a few spooky trees. We hounded them, wherever we thought they were. That's why there's still so

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few of them. But that's going to change a bit. She made that very clear.

She raised the subject herself one night. Her birthday, it was. We hadn't forgotten, we were hardly likely to. But she made sure anyway. Talk about nudge nudge, wink wink. Pete made her a cake, and didn't she tuck into it. I'd seen some healthy appetites before, but that was a classic demo. No weight-watching problems any more, you see. They trade off excess molecules the same way they take in nutrients, usually while passing through earth. The age enzymes go with them, which is why they're immortal. They don't really need to eat at all, not in the ordinary sense. She finished with a cuppa nonetheless, then asked if she could have a cigarette. She was looking thoughtful. "Dad," she said, "I want to talk to you. It's a bit serious."

I didn't have much doubt what it was about. I'd been reading the papers, watching the whole world getting ready to tear itself to bits. We hadn't got very long.

I thought when she did finally raise the matter, I'd at least need time to think. I didn't though. Funny. Or maybe it's not really so odd. I didn't want to be parted from her again, you see. But now it was me that was at risk. The only thing that worried me was having to go through what she'd had to first. And that was honestly more for her mother's sake than mine. But she shook her head. "It's nothing, Dad," she said. "It looks worse than it is; you really don't feel a thing. I was a bit scared right at the start, but you'll know what's happening. Anyway, it takes different people different ways. You won't have the time I had." They remember the future too of course, in bits and pieces; so I knew she wasn't talking without a book.

There was still one other thing though. I didn't know quite how to put it. She waited, grinning, and finally I said, "Kaeti, will it ... be you?" The grin got broader then, and she shook her head. "No, Dad," she said, "it won't be me. Be a bit intimate, wouldn't it? Don't worry about it though, somebody'll come."

Nice young kid she was too. A few years older than Kaeti. And really pretty, jet-black hair all done in sort of ringlets. Looked up-to-date enough apart from that, jeans and a sweater. But they were Kaeti's things of course, picked up from just next door. She knew a lot about the Thirty Years' War, said they tied one of her brothers across a cannon mouth. She wasn't bitter about it though; she wasn't bitter about anything. Of course she was looking at things from a different point of view.

I didn't really know what was expected of me. Not till she suddenly popped a finger into my mouth. It went through me then like an electric shock. She needn't have done it that way, I'm pretty sure. It was just to make things easier. Maybe she kissed me sometime, I can't remember. I think

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she must have, because suddenly I wasn't on the earth at all. I was out in space, and there were stars and suns, and mountains and a rubber-tired trolley going by, and a bank of flowers bigger than a planet. Everything was expanding, but it was shrinking too, all at the same time, reducing to a tiny shining dot. That was the One as well.

She talked a lot afterwards about love. Said what we know can only be a shadow. When two clouds merge, that's Joining. I said they must be Gods and Goddesses then, but that was muddle-headed. She said there was still something outside, they were still looking. So nothing really changes. Afterwards I laughed so loud I woke Pete up. Because I'd never left my bed, that was for sure. So it was still the dream. There was a disco running, somewhere in the village. Been thumping and crashing nearly all the night. I ask you, when folk have to be up by six. But that's the human race all over for you. I sometimes think it deserves what it's going to get.

We had a letter in the post next morning. First time I'd actually seen copperplate handwriting, it was just a phrase before. Done on some sort of parchment too, though the English was modern enough. It begged an interview on a most urgent matter, said that the writer would call that afternoon at three.

I know what I'd have said about that in the good old days. Afternoons are sacred for a publican; it's the only chance the poor blighter has to get some kip. But the way we were living that sort of thing had ceased to matter, and Pete was curious as well. Mainly because of the writing. She asked who it was from, but we could neither of us make it out. Address was a good class London hotel, but the signature was the only indecipherable part. It was just a florid scrawl, it could have been anything.

He was punctual to the minute. I heard the taxi pull up and went to the door. Tall, bony-looking bloke he was, wearing one of those funny old-fashioned Inverness capes. His suit looked dated too; good tweed, but with a queer-looking cut to it. And he was wearing a cravat and one of those high stiff collars, the sort you only see now on the films. "Good afternoon," he said, "it is kind of you to see me. My name is van Helsing. You may perhaps have heard of my great-grandfather. He was a man of some renown, in his own highly specialized field."

It didn't ring a bell with me at all. Not to start with anyway. I sized him up instead. His hair was pale, so pale I took it to be white at first. Then I decided it was the color of bleached-out straw. His eyes were indeterminate too, pale-lashed, and with an odd sort of sunken gleam. I started to wonder just what sort of a nut case we'd lumbered ourselves with. His voice was pleasant enough though, deep and well modulated, and his manners were impeccable. As old-world as his style of dress.

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Pete looked at me. She said, "Van who?" and he said "Helsing" again and gave a little bow. She glanced back to me, then shrugged and turned away, got busy with the teapot. I said, "So what can we do for you?"

He was staring round, chin raised in a searching sort of way. And snuffing, for all the world like a dog looking for a scent. Finally he nodded. "Yes," he said, "this is indeed the place. I sense it...."

I toyed with the idea that he might be from the Council after all, that somebody had made a complaint about the drains. I dismissed it straight away. He just hadn't got the right air of petty officialdom. There was something about him though. Sort of an authority. He turned to me gravely. "First," he said, "let me commiserate with you in your time of loss."

Pete froze in the act of pouring a cuppa. She said, "We don't want to talk about it. It's over and done with."

He leaned forward earnestly. "But, Mrs. Fredericks, it is not over," he said. "You know, and I know, that it is far from over...."

"Bill," she said, "have we got to listen to this?" But I shushed her. "All right," I said, "let him have his little say." I turned to the van Whatsit bloke. "And you'd better make it good, my friend," I said. "Wishing yourself on us like this, upsetting my wife. Who the hell do you think you are anyway?"

He said, "I have told you who I am." He shook his head, and I swear his voice was vibrating with sympathy. "Believe me," he said, "I do understand. Nothing would normally induce me to intrude on such a time of sorrow...."

"Look," I said, "get to the point, or get out." The name was still going round in the back of my mind. I was beginning to have a nasty feeling I had heard it before.

He got to the point. His way. It took a bit of time. He used a fair few high-flown words, but phrases like "the undead" were never far away. "To bring peace to that poor tormented soul," he said finally, "that is truly my only aim. It will be unpleasant, I realize that. Repugnant perhaps to any thinking being. But mercifully it is soon ended, and your child will be at rest. My apparatus is in the village, but I must have your consent...."

I think it was the word apparatus that did it. I remembered all the films I'd seen then. The mallets and pointed stakes. I didn't think I was hearing right at first. I couldn't speak for a minute; then I was on my feet. "Let's get this straight," I said. "You want to *open* our kid's *grave*...."

Pete was ahead of me though. She was always quicker on the uptake. A knife lay on the draining board; she snatched it up. "I'll give you graves," she said. "Get out that door, you bastard—"

He'd jumped up himself. "Mrs. Fredericks," he said, "you are making a

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terrible mistake—" That was as far as he got though. I yelled at her, but she'd already lunged.

How it missed him I shall never know. He eeled back somehow; then he was making for the door. "Deluded souls," he said. "You poor deluded souls...."

I grappled with Pete but she wrenched away. He didn't wait for anything else; he was through the door like a long dog. Next minute he was legging it down the lane. He didn't look back either, not till he turned the corner out of sight.

I went back. "It's all right, love," I said. "We shan't be seeing any more of him." Pete threw the knife down, sat back at the table. She put her face in her hands, then and started to cry. Later she said, "Bill, call the police."

"The police," I said. "What do you think they could do?"

"Stop him," she said. "There must be something they can get him on. Whoever he is."

"They wouldn't believe us to start with," I said. "Just think we'd been watching too much late-night telly. Anyway, think what he could do us for if they did catch up with him."

She stared at me. She said, "What do you mean?"

"Well," I said, "assault with a deadly weapon for a start."

"But it wasn't like that," she said, "It wasn't...."

"So you got upset," I said. "That's no reason to start waving knives about though. Leastways, that's how they'd see it."

She sat and looked at me miserably. "It's Kaeti," she said. "I was only thinking of Kaeti." Then the tears welled up again. "Bill," she said, "I'm afraid. I've never been so afraid...."

Kaeti laughed about it when I told her. "Oh, him," she said. "We know all about him; he's been mooning round for days. He's out of his tiny Chinese; there isn't a van Helsing. There never was. His real name's McMorrow or something. He's cleared off now though; we don't know where he went. I reckon Mum put the frighteners on him for good."

I hesitated. "Kaeti," I said, "you know what you told me once. About everybody knowing little bits. Would it ... is it a sort of formula? The stakes and that?"

She looked me straight in the eye. "Well," she said brightly, "look at it like this. If somebody rammed a dirty great spike through you, then cut your head off, you wouldn't be feeling too chipper, would you? Not to mention the garlic...."

I must admit I'd never looked at it like that.

After she'd gone I watched the dawn come up. I knew if I went to bed I wouldn't sleep. She'd been airy enough, dismissed the whole affair; but there was something at the backs of her eyes that I just didn't like. She was scared as well.

I went down to Camberley in the

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afternoon, had a look at the grave. I'm ashamed to admit I'd never been near before. At first I couldn't face it; then later there never seemed a need. Everything was neat, the marble curbs in place and the new lead lettering. KAETI LINDA FREDERICKS, it read. 1962 — 1979. And on the other side something Pete had dreamed up later, a line from a Roman poet. LIE LIGHTLY ON HER EARTH, SHE NEVER LAY HEAVY ON THEE. It brought it all a bit too close again. Even — well, knowing what I did. I walked back into town, bought a bunch of flowers, arranged them for her in the little zinc pot. The sun was shining, there were birds all over. Bit different from last time. I wondered if she — no, I didn't wonder anything. Anything at all.

It all seemed ridiculous, going back to the car. People with spades and dark lanterns. I mean, not in the twentieth century. I had a word with the old boy in the gatehouse nonetheless. He said the gates were padlocked seven sharp, he saw to it himself. There were high stout railings, and, anyway, the main road ran outside; there were streetlamps every few yards. Nobody would break in *there*.

All the same, the unease didn't go away. It stayed with me right through the day. By the time we got the bars shut I felt flaked out. Pete was looking tired as well; we decided we'd have an early night. Well, early for us. I was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

I had the most appalling dream. About van Helsing. He was stooping down, doing something near the ground. I couldn't see what. I shouted at him, but he didn't take any notice. So I shouted again. It seemed my voice went rushing out over a huge empty space. He turned at that and held something up. I still couldn't see. So he clicked a torch on for me. It was Kaeti's head. She was grinning, but her eyes were terrified. Her mouth was stuffed full of what looked like leaves, and a dreadful vivid beard ran down her chin. I grappled with the bastard then, tried to choke the life out of him. He fought back. He was stronger than he looked. I threshed about; then Pete was yelling at me. She said, "Wake up, for Christ's sake, Bill, *wake up!*"

I sat up. I felt groggy. I said, "I had this Godawful dream," and she yelled again. "It wasn't a dream, don't you know anything yet? Bill, *for Christ's sake....*"

She was dressing already. I said, "What is it love, what's wrong?" and she glared at me. She said, "She's in trouble. He's already there. The bastard's *there....*"

That sort of fear is infectious. I grabbed for my trousers and a shirt, flew downstairs and rammed a pair of shoes on. I still didn't believe it was happening to me. I ran the car back and she dived onto the front seat before I'd finished braking. She'd got the big old shotgun I bought once from Dick Stanton when I fancied trying my

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hand at a bit of rough-shooting. I said, "Jesus, what do you want that for? We can't take that...." But she just shouted at me. "Bill, get *going*...!"

The main gates of the cemetery were standing open. Padlock hanging from one of them, and a length of chain. I slewed the car through thinking I'd woken the street. The headlights jizzed on obelisks, stone angels. I hauled the wheel again, slashed beneath an overhanging tree. Then I was running two wheels up on grass, along a tarmac path. She yelled, "Right, go *right*...." A wire basket flew up in the air, a watering can went bowling across the path. Then I saw him. Just a glimpse, his head and shoulders as he straightened. Behind him the headlamps lit the mound of fresh-turned earth. He took one look and ducked out of sight again. I knew what he was doing somehow without seeing. He was wrestling with the lid.

Pete was out again before I'd stopped, and running. Her shadow went jumping ahead across the grass. I followed, leaping over graves. A curbstone caught my foot and I measured my length. It knocked the breath out of me for a minute. I could only watch.

It was as if it was all happening in slow motion. She yelled at him, just like I'd done in the dream. He showed his teeth but he didn't stop what he was doing. He raised the mallet; then the gun exploded. Both barrels. Among the echoes there seemed to be a tinkling. He was flung backwards, and the lamp that stood at the grave rim went out abruptly. Which was just as well. I'd never seen anybody hit at close range with a charge of shot before. I don't want to again.

I jumped down. God, but she was looking pretty. Like a rose, complete with scent and thorns. I lifted her. She was limp and warm. I looked at Pete and we didn't have to speak. No way was she going back down there again. Not ever.

One thing you can say for graves. They're great for getting rid of bodies in. Neither did I feel too much remorse. I reckoned he'd got about what he deserved. Even to the second-hand coffin.

We worked like demons, the pair of us. I knew we couldn't possibly fill it all back in, get it squared off by daylight. There wasn't a chance. We did it though, somehow.

Pete drove us back. I was seeing to Kaeti. I kissed her once and she opened her big eyes. She said, "Thanks, Dad," and went to sleep again.

The roads were all deserted, no lights showing anywhere. The one car we did meet had its headlamps masked to slits. I wondered what they must have thought of us. I didn't pay that much attention though. Not till we got back in sight of Blackwell. I did look out then. Dawn was in the sky, sort of a pale grey flush. It showed me the outlines of the ack-ack guns, the long slim barrels pointing up. I looked the other way, to the sullen glow low down that

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meant London had had its nightly pasting again.

I went back in the morning. Didn't know quite what I would see. It was all right though. Just the lines of graves, the bright, tidy grass. All signs of the disturbance had long since gone. Nor did the gatekeeper say anything about the padlock. But I hardly expected he'd remember a little thing like that. After all, a lot of stuff went missing in the blackout.

She woke a few times crying after that. There was always one of us on hand to soothe. She tried to tell me once what it was like. Hearing the spade, from wherever she had been. Scraping coming closer, then the thumping on the lid. "I never did no harm to him," she said. "None of us did...." I held her till she was quiet. "It's all right, love," I said, "it won't come again, not ever. It's over...."

Next night she wasn't there. Gone out to recharge. Only now she had her own place to come back to, a room where we always kept the curtains drawn. The locals thought it was a sudden sign of mourning. Only Dick Stanton guessed. Or maybe it was more. He hasn't been too well this last couple of weeks. Throat infection that doesn't seem to clear. I heard they had the Doc the other day.

I think Time's wearing thin for all of us. Sometimes I hear the guns now, from a war I don't remember. Sometimes there's other things. The mushroom clouds all rising, and the fireballs. The walls of the pub all glow then, like bright glass. It happened a minute ago. In the old reckoning of Time. It didn't worry us though. I took Pete by the hand, and Kaeti, and we floated down, stood and watched the common light up and burn. There were others coming and then more, a great big crowd. There was one we called the Master. Not Vlad the Impaler though. He'll give the signal, when he's good and ready; and we'll all be away and gone. Headed for the dark side of another World. It won't take long. Because there isn't really Space, any more than there's Time.

There. It happened again. The paper I was writing on was burning, curling and blackening at the edges. But that don't matter either. All it means is that the One has grown a bit bigger. By something short of fifteen thousand human words. And a boat is setting sail, but not for Norway. And we stand on it and see the atoms dance, locked in a sort of brilliant, breathless Now.

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This short and surprising tale grew from an encounter at a Santa Ana, Ca. grocery store, where the author was buying cat food and encountered a teenager who was editor of the Yuba City High School student paper and who was enterprising enough to ask Mr. Dick to write a story for the paper. Phil agreed, and here is the happy result (which will also appear in the Yuba City High School High Times).

The Alien Mind

BY

PHILIP K. DICK

Inert within the depths of his Theta Chamber he heard the faint tone and then the synthovoice. "Five minutes."

"Okay," he said, and struggled out of his deep sleep. He had five minutes to adjust the course of his ship; something had gone wrong with the autocontrol system. An error on his part? Not likely; he never made errors. Jason Bedford make errors? Hardly.

As he made his way unsteadily to the control module, he saw that Norman, who had been sent with him to amuse him, was also awake. The cat floated slowly in circles, batting at a pen that somehow had gotten loose. Strange, Bedford thought.

"I thought you were unconscious with me." He examined the read-out of the ship's course. Impossible! A fifth-parsec off in the direction of Sirius. It would add a week to his journey. With grim precision he reset the controls, then sent out an alert signal to Meknos III, his destination.

"Troubles?" the Meknosian operator answered. The voice was dry and cold, the calculating monotone of

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something that always made Bedford think of snakes.

He explained his situation.

"We need the vaccine," the Meknosian said. "Try to stay on course."

Norman the cat floated majestically by the control module, reached out a paw and jabbed at random; two activated buttons sounded faint *bleeps* and the ship altered course.

"So you did it," Bedford said. "You humiliated me in the eyes of an alien. You have reduced me to idiocy vis-a-vis the alien mind." He grabbed the cat: And squeezed.

"What was that strange sound?" the Meknosian operator asked. "A kind of lament."

Bedford said quietly, "There's nothing left to lament. Forget you heard it." He shut off the radio, carried the cat's body to the trash sphincter and ejected it.

A moment later he had returned to his Theta Chamber and, once more, dozed. This time there would be no tampering with his controls. He dozed in peace.

When his ship docked at Meknos III, the senior member of the alien medical team greeted him with an odd request. "We would like to see your pet."

"I have no pet," Bedford said. Certainly it was true.

"According to the manifest filed with us in advance —"

"It is really none of your business," Bedford said. "You have your vaccine; I'll be taking off."

The Meknosian said, "The safety of any life form is our business. We will inspect your ship."

"For a cat that doesn't exist," Bedford said.

Their search proved futile. Impatiently, Bedford watched the alien creatures scrutinize every storage locker and passage-way on his ship. Unfortunately, the Meknosians found ten sacks of dry cat-kibble. A lengthy discussion ensued among them, in their own language.

"Do I have permission," Bedford said harshly, "to return to Earth now? I'm on a tight schedule." What the aliens were thinking and saying was of no importance to him; he wished only to return to his silent Theta Chamber and profound sleep.

"You'll have to go through decontamination procedure A," the senior Meknosian medical officer said. "So that no spore or virus from —"

"I realize that," Bedford said. "Let's get it done."

Later, when decontamination had been completed and he was back in his ship starting up the drive, his radio came on. It was one or another of the Meknosians; to Bedford they all looked alike. "What was the cat's name?" the Meknosian asked.

"Norman," Bedford said, and jabbed the ignite switch. His ship shot upward and he smiled.

* * *

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He did not smile, however, when he found the power supply to his Theta Chamber missing. Nor did he smile when the back-up unit could also not be located. Did I forget to bring it? he asked himself. No, he decided; I wouldn't do that. They took it.

Two years before he reached Terra. Two years of full consciousness on his part, deprived of theta sleep; two years of sitting or floating or — as he had seen in military-preparedness training holofilms — curled up in a corner totally psychotic.

He punched out a radio request to return to Meknos III. No response. Well, so much for that.

Seated at his control module, he snapped on the little inboard computer and said, "My Theta Chamber won't function; it's been sabotaged. What do you suggest I do for two years?"

THERE ARE EMERGENCY
ENTERTAINING TAPES

"Right," he said. He would have remembered. "Thank you." Pressing the proper button, he caused the door of the tape compartment to slide open.

No tapes. Only a cat toy — a miniature punching bag — that had been included for Norman; he had never gotten around to giving it to him. Otherwise ... bare shelves.

The alien mind, Bedford thought. Mysterious and cruel.

Setting the ship's audio recorder going, he said calmly and with as much conviction as possible, "What I will do is build my next two years around the daily routine. First, there are meals. I will spend as much time as possible planning, fixing, eating and enjoying delicious repasts. During the time ahead of me I will try out every combination of victuals possible." Unsteadily, he rose and made his way to the massive food-storage locker.

As he stood gazing into the tightly packed locker — tightly packed with row upon row of identical snacks — he thought, On the other hand there's not much you can do with a two-year supply of cat-kibble. In the way of variety. Are they all the same flavor?

They were all the same flavor.

About the cover

The Volcanoes of Io. The Voyager 1 and 2 probes revealed the Galilean moons of Jupiter to be even more interesting than had been anticipated. Of these, Io is the most amazing, with its pizza-colored surface and active volcanoes. Here David Hardy shows a close-up of one of these, with another erupting on the horizon and revealing the "umbrella" of its gas plume. The eruptions are probably caused by liquid sulfur dioxide, acting rather as water does in Earth's crust but constantly stirred by heat generated from tidal forces caused by Jupiter and Europa. Jupter's ring is also faintly visible, the giant planet itself being in eclipse.

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Reg Bretnor's strikingly fresh and different new story is based on Japanese history (the references are all accurate) to project a far-future Japanese colony in space that has somehow gone wrong.

My Object All Sublime

BY
REGINALD BRETNOR

My object all sublime
I shall achieve in time—
To let the punishment fit the crime—
The punishment fit the crime...
W.S. Gilbert, *The Mikado*

In the one-thousand-and-third year after the great Diaspora following the discovery of Gilpin's Space, when tens and hundreds of millions fled Earth and its terrors, the cloistered planet Yamato sent an embassy across the light-years to learn what had befallen Old Japan and — with great caution — to seek the wisdom of which so suddenly it stood in need. The embassy was ordered, only with grave reservations and after much discussion, by the young Empress Suiko — she who after her death received the canonical name of Go Shotoku — and it was headed by her consort, Prince and Admiral Saionji no Tadaiye.

It was the thousandth year since Fujiwara Norisuke, physicist, inventor, and industrial magnate, after three years of searching and venturing further than any of his contemporaries, had led his eight-ship fleet through the dark space-clouds that veiled their new sun and its twelve circling worlds. The fifth, miraculously Earthlike, he named Yamato, and there he and his people labored to realize his dream of a Japan reborn into its Nara Period, when the Buddhism now married to his own theoretical physics had been at its most glorious, before warrior clans had gained the power to stamp the land with their cruel arrogance and interminable rivalries.

The several thousand men and women who came with him were Ja-

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pan's finest: eminent scientists and technologists, learned monks and their venerable abbots, patricians with the history of their ancient country written in their fine, handsome faces, and artists and craftsmen — some of them esteemed as Living National Treasures — *sumi* painters and singers of *uta*, swordsmiths and makers of pottery for the tea ceremony, casters and carvers of iron and bronze, composers and performers endowed with the entire world's musical heritage, famous architects and landscape gardeners, farmers and teachers of every conceivable discipline — all those whom he deemed essential to a cultural flowering.

Theirs was not, however, a flight into any long-lost simplicity. Fujiwara Norisuke had never dreamed of a technologically primitive Eden. A literal resurrection of old Nara was not his goal; the distillation of its ideals was to be simply a starting point. With them, his people brought their computers, their automated factories, their agricultural techniques of gene-splicing and cloning, their power tools that could rend mountains and bore beneath ocean beds; they brought the seeds and cuttings of plum and cherry trees, of oaks and tall pines and vast cryptomerias; their ships carried the germ-substance, ready for awakening, of cattle and fine horses, dogs and cats and rabbits, of such interesting creatures as foxes and raccoons, badgers and Manchurian tigers, of barnyard fowl and swiftly soaring hawks and solemn, ruthless owls, of songbirds and sparrows.

The average intelligence of those men and women was probably close to the genius level, but even more important, they all — even, or perhaps especially, the foreigners among them — at least to some extent shared Fujiwara's dream. That, and their essential sanity, enabled them to traverse the strangenesses of Gilpin's Space and to survive. They contributed their infinity of skills: medical sciences so perfected that they would have little to fear from alien plagues, psychological techniques so precise and gentle that at the time they seemed a certain guarantee against any recurrence of the cataclysmic social ills destroying Earth, and such power over nature's forces that even the perils of planets far less hospitable than Yamato would have held little terror for them. Having no further need either for Earth or for those other worlds Earth's refugees were colonizing, they could withdraw behind their veil, self-isolated, very much as Japan had withdrawn from the world during the Tokugawa Shogunate.

Yamato was a water planet with widely separated land masses, mountained and forested, icebound at its poles, a planet with softly drifting clouds and driving storms. Fujiwara Norisuke, who had written papers on synchronicity and karma, had seen that just as his fleet had eight ships so this new world had eight continents. All the coincidences were favorable, all

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the unsought omens by which men once again were guiding their decisions. So were the oracles of the *I Ching* when he — or perhaps it would be more accurate to say his highly personalized computer — cast the yarrow-stalks.

They landed, and he formally named their world and announced that its capital, when its site had been selected, would be called Nara.

Within a century, the century of life that remained to Norisuke, who had been middle-aged at their arrival, an ancient culture had been reincarnated, far, far different now from the one that had inspired it. This was the century of establishment, during which the new Nara rose amid mountains, to be surrounded by the forest-parks provided by the seeds from Old Japan, its palaces and temples glorious with soft, glowing wood and red and golden lacquer, its soaring modern buildings complementing them and echoing them much as a full Western symphony orchestra can complement and glorify the music of the *koto*. The native ecology was not delicately balanced; its flora were as tough as lichens and as sensitive as Hawaiian *hila-hila* grass, shrinking from the intruders, yielding ground to them, harmless and demurely graceful; its fauna also were shy and unaggressive, almost all herbivorous, fearing few predators, and almost without exception either inedible or nauseating to predators from Earth. There were flying creatures not quite birds, and beasts that ran and scurried and were not quite mammals; and hawks and owls and hunting cats learned quickly not to trouble them. It was a situation rather like that encountered by the first white settlers of Australia, but for native life far more benign.

So was the city founded, and the State established. With them, Fujiwara Norisuke had brought a young Imperial prince, for he understood the importance to men and their civilizations of tradition, of ritual and ceremony, and of all those spiritual panoplies and graces that invest daily life with meaning. After five years, the prince was proclaimed *Tenno Heika*, just as his ancestors had been over the endless centuries of Japan, and Fujiwara Norisuke took office as Kampaku, or Prime Minister, to govern in his name, with a Minister of the Left and a Minister of the Right, as in the ancient days, but also with a Great Council representing the five Estates: Clergy; Scientists; a governing Nobility corresponding to antique China's mandarins; Artists, Architects, and Builders; Sages and Teachers.

It was a society founded not on classlessness, for it recognized that *no* men are equal, but rather on mutual esteem, a mutual recognition of worth and differing abilities. It worked, and it worked very well indeed, unhindered by the vicious envies, enmities, and paranoid suspicions that had

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threatened to destroy Old Earth. Naturally, men being men, each bearing his own karma, it was not crime-free — not quite — but its crimes were individual ones, crimes of impulse, crimes of passion, crimes of suddenly and inexplicably twisted minds. They were rare, partly because society provided their perpetrators few excuses and no encouragement, and partly because new worlds invite strong men to conquer them and, in the process, triumph in the conquest of themselves. So the new civilization of Yamato was a humane one. Punishment was seldom necessary, seldom inflicted, and — even as in the original Nara Period — never capital.

During that first century, then, each of Yamato's continents was settled, with its own cities and its own capital, all owing fealty to Nara; and gradually each attracted men and women especially suited to it, for three were temperate, three tropical or subtropical, and two very nearly arctic. They were explored, and their natural riches were exploited: their mines, such of their plants as man could use, and the rich seas surrounding them where there were fishes very like Earth's own, the only living creatures there that men could eat and relish. Their deserts were irrigated; their vast rivers sometimes dammed, sometimes diverted; their mighty mountains climbed. Not until the century's end, when Norisuke at length lay upon his deathbed, was any serious effort made to explore the eleven other planets thoroughly. Dying, he had summoned his sons and daughters, the Ministers of the Left and Right, the Abbots of the three greatest shrines and monasteries, and the heads of each Estate, to his last audience. With them came the Emperor also, weeping unashamedly.

Norisuke looked at them all silently, smiling at them, his mind harking back to their fulfillment of his dream. He told them that he was about to die. He recommended his successor as Kampaku, who also was a Fujiwara, as was right and proper.

"And now," he said, his ancient, graceful fingers running the beads of the Buddhist rosary round his thin wrist, "now it is my hope and my desire that you will venture out to our companion worlds. You have surveyed them from afar; you have mapped them and analyzed their atmospheres; to some of them you already have sent manned and unmanned vessels. I am leaving you. In this world, certainly, I shall never see those worlds. They are to be your task and your adventure."

He let his gaze drift to the window, to the bright daylight of Yamato's sun, to the spotted deer quietly grazing under the cryptomerias, to green bamboo clusters keeping company with fragile, mauve-and-pale-yellow native fronds. Then he looked back at those around him and his smile vanished.

"You must take care," he said, "to keep Yamato hidden and unknown. Almost certainly, wherever man has

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gone he has carried the evils that drove him from the Earth. Perhaps here and there, on more fortunate worlds, he has outgrown those evils even as have we. Perhaps in the fullness of time we will again be found. But that time is not yet. For the time being, there is enough to do to bring our dream to its perfection. Our August Sovereign—" He inclined his head in reverence. "—has already ordained that our solar system shall be constantly patrolled by manned and automated craft, broadcasting subtle force-fields to awaken nameless fears in sentient beings, and I beg you never to relax your vigilance."

Again he smiled upon them, and lifted a finger toward the small lacquer shrine of the Gautama Buddha to indicate that the audience was at an end, and bade them farewell; and only the Emperor, and his own eldest son and daughter, the three Abbots, and one close friend, an aged priest, were with him when he died.

All Yamato mourned Norisuke. He was enshrined with reverence and with due ceremony, virtually deified, and everything he had said or written became gospel. For seven hundred years, this did no harm, for the civilization of Yamato was too young in spirit, too spiritually vigorous, and too joyously immersed in all the challenges of exploration and discovery to be chained by words too frequently repeated and no longer really understood. It was a wise civilization. It knew that men, and young men especially, must learn to risk their lives in order to live fully. It also knew that there are duties men cannot delegate completely to machines without forgetting the essence of their own humanity: the duties of the artist, the farmer and the gardener, the shaper and the carver and the builder, the duty man must pay to nature in small and simple ways, the duty he will always owe to the sublime consciousness of which he is a part. So on Yamato, where there was no material need for them, there still were men who tilled the soil, and men who cherished flowers to grow, and men who sailed with the winds for the joy of it.

The first four centuries after Norisuke's death were centuries of adventure, of discovery on the eleven accompanying worlds, of vast projects undertaken and splendidly completed, of majestic music and magnificently simple, magnificently abstract art speaking of dragon flights of daring and the dreamed-of calm of Buddhahood. The peoples and cultures of the eight continents were no longer uniform. Though all were embraced within the encompassing ideal, they flourished in a diversity born of different climates, parochial interests and activities, and creative rivalries, all of which were encouraged by Norisuke's successors. Reign followed serene reign, Empresses as well as Emperors inheriting the Throne as they had in ancient Nara so many years before.

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The sciences continued to progress, and every Utopian ideal men had ever dreamed of was realized: freedom from all disease, from idiocy, from the sad debilitations of old age, from every form of want, and — because a planet's moods were now predictable and to some extent controllable — from the terror of natural cataclysms.

Those four glorious centuries were followed by three more which came to be known as the Period of the Conquest of Technology. No longer were machines allowed to be obtrusive. The most sophisticated computers could be conjured up instantly by a clapping of the hands, by a whispered word, and they would either whisper their responses or write them glowingly in thin air. Communication between men was, of course, instantaneous throughout the world; and people, singly or in groups, could drift slowly a few feet off the ground or soar swiftly to the cloud-wreathed tops of mountains; and music could be summoned from rustling bamboo-groves, from rice fields, from tombstones and stone lanterns and ancient iron kettles and the throats of startled birds.

Only one man, at the very end of the eight hundred years, regarded the future of Yamato with foreboding, a descendant of Norisuke's named Fujiwara no Hitomaro, who also was Kampaku, and who left behind him a heritage of poems set as questions. He asked whether these contrived simplicities were truly simple, whether they might themselves exist simply to conceal no-longer-understood complexities, whether the way they pointed was not a very different one from the way of the Lotus Sutra, of Boddhi Dharma, of those thunderbolt *koan* Zen masters had always used to shock their pupils into all-awareness. He asked whether, wearing the apparel of such simplicities, men might cease to look beneath it, to find the simplicity of their own complexities and the unfathomed complexity of what they believed simple.

His poems became famous for their beauty and their sadness. They were taken as examples for all aspiring poets. Occasionally, a monk-philosopher might urge his fellow monks and his disciples to take them seriously, but by and large they had no influence. Man, Hitomaro had written, was like an iceberg, his present life and personality the merest fragment of his being, never revealing the vast submerged karmic totality of life after life, of his own karma and the shared karma of his relatives and friends, his land, his world. And did not the men of Yamato, he asked, perforce share the karma of all men everywhere?

The cosmologies of physics and of Buddhist mysticism had long since merged. All pressing questions appeared to have been answered. There was no need to seek elsewhere, to be concerned with less fortunate men on planets not so blessed, to worry about what might have happened to Old Earth, to wonder whether perhaps

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other civilizations might not have found other, even more valid paths. Besides, by then the written legacy of Norisuke had assumed an authority he himself would never have condoned, so that in questioning his ancestor's pronouncements Hitomaro had committed the one heresy the Buddhism of Yamato could not accept — and Buddhism has always been singularly tolerant of heresies, never denouncing them as such but always embracing them in its universal fold. So on Yamato religion, while religion and the sciences flourished, because the behavior of most men toward their fellows was beyond reproach, increasingly the study of man and his motives was slighted by both science and religion. After all, the psychological and sociological techniques developed so long ago had worked, and still were working, smoothly. An entire and now diverse world, in which each subculture had its niche, its recognition, was embraced and guided by the still-virile parent culture of the new Nara. Yet, very slowly, men were changing. The world they had named Yamato was itself changing them; their long isolation from Old Earth and its far-scattered children was changing them; the fact that they had achieved what seemed to be a final, and therefore static, understanding of themselves was changing them as well, subtly, in ways still unperceived.

Then, in the last two hundred years, though sincere and persistent efforts were being made to maintain the spirit of trial and adventure, the reality was no longer there. On every one of the twelve planets, every hazard had been dared, each challenge met and overcome, every living thing studied and classified. Gradually, men's energies found new channels. The arts flourished as never before, and in every idiom, for every major culture of Old Earth was recorded in their computer banks and libraries. Games of skill and strength, gymnastics physical and mental, waxed and waned in popularity. Travel was cultivated as an art, very much as it had been in Japan itself. Railroads were built, their coaches running on utterly smooth ceramic rails, so that travelers might again have the pleasure of listening to the primitive raw power of steam locomotives as the countryside flowed past them, and ships driven by steam and sail, swift, graceful, and luxurious, plied the seas. Once again, the great languages of Earth were learned, not by dedicated scholars only, but by people eager for the flavor of unaccustomed words, or novel shades of meaning. They were called game-languages, and men vied against each other, cities against cities, continents against continents, composing poetry in them. Architects ventured into unexplored areas of concepts and materials, playing with strangely malleable ceramics, with glowing substances whose colors altered at a glance or a command, with floating cities and

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cloud-piercing palaces.

At first, the *wrongness* was not even noticed, for it appeared only as very slight irregularities in the world-computer's holographic Tranquillity Index, consulted daily as a matter of ritual by the Sovereign, the Kampaku, and the Greater Ministers. For two decades toward the end of the final century, these were seen but not really noticed; so gradual was their onset that at first no one even asked what they might signify. Then, for another decade, Ministers would occasionally put the question in memorials to the Throne, and it would be duly passed through the established channels to scientists responsible for the computer's maintenance; who invariably replied that it was functioning perfectly. But in the last decade, the trouble could no longer be ignored. It could no longer be denied. The evidence only too obviously was there, mounting now along a steeply accelerating curve.

It was very simple. Men were no longer treating other men as, on Yamato, they had always done. Crime was increasing, and it no longer had the simplicity of the burst of anger, the sudden aberration. Now there were crimes of envy and jealousy, crimes of ruthless ambition and calculated cruelty, crimes carefully planned and cunningly carried out, crimes involving not only individuals but larger and larger groups.

The Emperor of the time was an aged man, and weary, and it saddened him to think that his life and reign would end leaving Yamato a prey to those Earth-sicknesses Norisuke had hoped to leave behind forever. He and his Kampaku did their utmost. All the psychological arts and sciences were called upon. Each case was studied intensively, and all offenders received the most advanced therapies. Every resource, after nearly a thousand years of almost unvarying success, failed totally. The number of recidivists was almost as great as the number of criminals apprehended.

On Earth, little attention might have been paid to it, for the overall rate was then far below what Earth had normally experienced. But on Yamato it was frightening, and a wave of profound disquiet spread from continent to continent, for the threat to the very fabric of their existence could not be hidden from the people. Suddenly, first in the tropics, militant political movements erupted without warning, once again pretending — as in Old Japan — to speak in the Emperor's interest and in his name. Suddenly, too, into the tolerant world of Buddhism came religious bigotry, religious frenzy, hatred in the name of religion. A priest proclaiming himself a reincarnation of Nichiren now stalked through the world; using the universally available communications media, he screamed for the extirpation of all sects other than his own, blaming them for the

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evils that had descended on Yamato. And frightened people listened and heeded him.

The old Emperor died, heartbroken, and was succeeded by his niece, the Princess Suiko. She was young and tall, and there was no woman more gracious or more beautiful, and there was no woman in Yamato with a stronger will. As Admiral, her consort the Prince Saionji commanded the fleet that patrolled the outer limits of their system to protect their solitude. On his advice, she accepted the resignations of the Kampaku and the highest Ministers and appointed others recommended by the Great Council. Some of these were younger than their predecessors and more vigorous; others, as old or older, were famous for their learning and their wisdom. The new Kampaku, Fujiwara no Tokimasa, was a huge, dour man in his middle years, noted for stern performance of his duties; for three years he had directed the forces hastily organizeed to act against crime and criminals. Yamato had never needed anything resembling a traditional police force, and so he had to supervise not only their organization but their training, seeking information in the unsane records of Old Earth, applying their lessons unrelentingly.

The New Minister of the Left, the Abbot Myoju of the shrine and research-monastery dedicated to the memory of Norisuke, was at once cleric, sage, and scientist; he had accepted the office with reluctance. The new Minister of the Right, his junior, was an elderly noble of the ancient Konoye family, Konoye no Masashige, an authority on the history of Old Earth and Old Japan before the Diaspora and a poet of renown in three languages.

Immediately after her investiture, the Empress summoned them to audience in the vast pillared and daised hall where the Throne stood. They came, attended by their subordinate Ministers and by the Council, knowing why she had summoned them.

She sat there, regal in her austere silken robes, her heavy black hair bound by a single fillet and glowing against the golden lacquer of the Throne. The Prince, uniformed, stood at her side. Without preamble, she ordered Tokimasa to report.

"August Sovereign," he began, his voice deep and somber, "everything is as it was before the Imperial obsequies and your accession. Only it is worse." He clapped his hands, very much as one does to summon the spirits of one's ancestors, and in the air before the Throne appeared the world-computer's hologram. "There," Tokimasa said, "are the statistics. Before and after. From every continent. The deterioration is only too apparent." He clapped his hands again, and the hologram displayed a complexity of curves, each representing a category of crime, and all combining into one. "That curve," he said, "shows the past three years, since I was appointed. Now we shall

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extrapolate it into the future." For the third time, he clapped his hands, and the curve changed its color, stabbing redly upward like a sword blade.

The Empress Suiko's expression did not change, but she gasped almost inaudibly. "I shall not waste your time," she told him, "asking what measures have been taken. I already know. The all-important question is *what do we do now?*"

"My present view, oh *Akitsumikami*," he answered slowly, "is one of which I am ashamed, for it seems almost a betrayal of everything Yamato stands for. August Sovereign, we have forgotten how to punish."

"*Punish?*" she said.

"Indeed, punish. In the darkness of Old Earth, before Saul Gilpin made it possible for men to escape, severe punishment was used to deter crime. It is disgraceful that men should do such things to other men. But to a degree it worked."

"We have never *really* punished on Yamato, Tokimasa." She spoke sadly. "Our reproofs have been gentle, our treatment of the few who have committed crimes infinitely patient."

"That is true, Augustness. But we have changed. Something has happened which no one understands. What else can we do but revert to savage ways even as our new breed of criminals has reverted?"

She turned to the Abbot Myoju, and to Konoye no Masashige. "What is your opinion?"

The Abbot hung his shaven head. "It is our karma, August Sovereign. We must strive to understand it and to achieve the conquest of ourselves. Possibly punishment will be a step towards that goal. Perhaps it is the only course now open to us. But it would not be my choice."

Konoye no Masashige spoke. "I agree that it must be our karma," he declared. "What else could it be? Our scientists have tried to understand its causes and effects. They have studied every environmental and social influence. Genetic research has told us nothing. Every avenue of enquiry has been exhausted. Even the yarrow-stalks have been ambiguous. But consider — for a thousand years we have banished ourselves from humankind. Much as a man abandons the world and enters a monastery, so have we abandoned the Universe. But have we escaped mankind's karma? Or is it now overtaking us?"

He paused. Slowly and beautifully, he spoke the poem of Fujiwara no Hitomaro comparing man to an iceberg.

The audience hall was silent.

He smiled. "Perhaps the time has come for us to let our hair grow out again, to leave our cloister, to rejoin the human race. Perhaps we should share what we have accomplished, and learn what other men have done, and if it can be of value to us."

The Empress saw consternation on the faces of her Counsellors — astonishment, and fear, and on Tokimasa's

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heavy face hot anger.

"With all respect to Prince Konoye," he answered, his anger harsh in his throat, "That is unthinkable. It was Norisuke's desire that we sequester ourselves here in perpetuity. Do we dare risk all he dreamed of, all we have created, on such a gamble? It would be madness. No, Augustness, we must first try other means to solve our problem here, so that we may keep Yamato sacred and inviolate."

"And you would do this by reinstituting punishment?" the Empress asked. "What sort of punishment do you propose? How can we make certain that justice will indeed be done, that the cure will not be more insidiously evil than the disease?"

"On our continent of Hokkaido," he replied, "there is a very great, very famous teacher who has mastered not only the physical sciences but the psychological ones as well. His name is Makenna—"

"I have heard of him," said the Empress Suiko. "His first ancestors were Norisuke's foreigners."

"The same. He even now is perfecting a device which will ensure that, when punishment must be inflicted, perfect justice will be done. He has informed me that his work progresses favorably — that he is absolutely certain of success, and soon."

"How will this device function, Tokimasa?"

"I do not know, August Sovereign. All he has told me is that it will look infallibly into the minds of men, and I have not pressed him for the details."

"But there already are such devices, are there not?"

"True," he said, "but Makenna's has improved on them. It will show men their own minds, their own hidden motives."

For a time, the Empress regarded them in silence, saying nothing. Then she bade them consider the alternatives with care and told them she would hold audience again in a week.

"You have heard two alternatives," she said. "Now I myself shall offer you a third. Let us send a single embassage through Gilpin's Space back to Old Earth, which we can easily find from our old records. We will not have to reveal the location of Yamato, and Prince Saionji tells me that in Gilpin's Space it is impossible for one ship to follow another for any distance. We will remain secure, and perhaps the embassy will bring back knowledge of which we have not dreamed, which will now serve us well." Turning to her husband, she asked him whether he would head such an embassy and command the ship that bore it; and he, smiling at her, bowed his acquiescence.

She indicated that the audience was at an end, and a week later, against Tokimasa's determined opposition, the Council voted to accept her plan.

Prince Konoye made no attempt to stop them.

Travel through Gilpin's Space is

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fast, and the embassy, crossing the unaccustomed light-years between Yamato and Old Earth, was gone six weeks only, six weeks during which crime and tension mounted at an unprecedented rate, and, sparked by the monk who called himself Nichiren, riots flared on two continents and there were assaults and burnings.

The embassy returned at night, materializing out of Gilpin's Space on the same wide green field where Norisuke's eight ships had first touched down, and Prince Saionji made his way directly to the Palace, pausing only to apprise his Empress of his return. She met him at the great gates, saying no word, and gave him both her hands.

"You are beautiful," he whispered to her, "more beautiful than any woman ever was on all the worlds."

Overhead, two of Yamato's three moons soared in their fullness, and silently her courtiers moved to clear the path for her and her consort and to close the gates silently behind them.

She led him down into the gardens, past pools and waterfalls, around silent shrines, into a glen where the incredibly tall fronds of Yamato's plants waved in the moonlight although there was no breeze, and Earth-insects sang. She led him to the bench that was her favorite, and sat beside him.

"You have much to tell me?" she asked softly.

"I have much to tell you, but I will tell you later. About the embassy, there's not much to tell. Old Earth is not what we had thought it would be, and Old Japan — well, Old Japan is now unrecognizable. Indeed, now we *are* Japan. The people of Old Earth are changed beyond belief. As we expected, some of us did not survive the passage of Gilpin's Space; in that regard, despite all our advances and discoveries, we did no better than our ancestors. But there are people who traverse it regularly, with whom it is a way of life, even as it is with sailors and the sea. They are called Far Outers, and it is they who have so changed Earth—"

He went on to relate that now the people of Old Earth were courteous, hospitable, neither aloof nor arrogant — but that they were completely uninvolved, incurious, uninterested in what Yamato may or may not have done or undergone — that they listened with apparent sympathy when he told them of the problem, but offered neither suggestions nor assistance. There had been no problem of communication, for there had been many there fluent in archaic Japanese and ancient English, which was one of the game-languages he and she most enjoyed.

"I can only tell you of my feeling with regard to them," he said. "Let us consider our sacred Imperial myths. No longer do we believe them, not literally, but we believe *in* them — in their importance to our society and ourselves, in the truths they have at once hidden and displayed. I feel that now these peoples of Old Earth have

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taken a step we have not taken, penetrating to the pure heart of every myth — that they are aware of things we cannot know."

He frowned in puzzlement, and the Empress said, "I feel something of what you feel. They did nothing for you?"

He told her of their entertainment, of how they had been shown all the sites important to their own Earth-history, of the invisible barriers which had risen when he had asked for counsel or for comment.

"So," she said finally, in a small voice, "you brought back nothing?"

"I brought back one thing only," he answered. "A book. An English book more than a thousand years old. Those who gave it to me the day we left told me it was a gift for you, and there was amusement in their eyes. It is a curious book, a play written about Old Japan by people who knew nothing of our ways and institutions, who made fun ignorantly of the Throne, but who did so with no malice in their hearts. Its title is *The Mikado*. Tomorrow I shall tell you more and show it to you."

"Tomorrow you can tell me more," she said, "but show it to me now, tonight, before we go to bed. After I have seen it, you can hold me in your arms."

They made their way into the Palace, and he showed her the libretto, paperbound, its pages chemically preserved, its orginal covers protected by a blue morocco binding.

She opened it at random and read aloud:

My object all sublime
I shall achieve in time—
To let the punishment fit the crime—
The punishment fit the crime...

She broke off, frowning. "This," she told him, "is not meaningless, not to us, not in our dilemma!"

Then she read on:

And make each prisoner pent
Unwillingly represent
A source of innocent merriment!
Of innocent merriment!

"But *that*," she exclaimed, "most certainly is not for us. It is too cruel — though I see that they did not mean it to be taken seriously."

She closed the book, and gave it back to him. "You have been gone too long, my love. Let's think no more of signs and omens for tonight. There are more pleasant things for us to dwell upon."

Next morning, at the audience hour, the Prince Saionji made his report to the Kampaku and the greater Ministers in the presence of the Empress. He told them of his journey, of Old Earth and its people, and of the apparent failure of the mission. Finally, he displayed the book he had been given and told them how it had opened directly to a verse which, in the Empress' opinion and his own, seemed unmistakably to refer to their problem.

The Empress Suiko lifted the volume from her lap and opened it and, in a voice like a silver bell ringing through

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every corner of the hall, read the verse to them:

My object all sublime
I shall achieve in time—
To let the punishment fit the crime—
The punishment fit the crime...

For moments, there was no sound. Then Tokimasa, face suddenly flushed, asked if he might speak and, even before permission could be granted, spoke out forcefully. "August Sovereign, this is indeed an omen! Surely the Gods have spoken, for how else can we interpret what it says? Consider, that is exactly what the learned *sensei* of whom I spoke, Makenna, has been striving for. It is exactly what, only yesterday, he told me he has accomplished!"

"What do you mean, Tokimasa? the Empress asked.

The Kampaku's eyes flashed. 'The punishment will best fit the crime when it is imposed by him who, in his heart, knows what the crime has been and why it was committed — *the criminal.* Makenna has perfected a device which, as I said before, can peer deeply into the minds of men. But other devices can do that. His can do much more. It can bring the criminal face to face with his Buddha-self, his own conscience, which will judge him and choose his punishment — and make no mistake, August Sovereign, every man *has* a conscience, no matter how submerged, how well defended by his desires and passions. You yourself will not have to impose punishments; nor worry whether they are just. Nor will there be any coercion of offenders beyond that necessary to bring them before the court of his own Buddha-self."

"Tokimasa," asked the Empress, "has this device been tried?"

"Yes, Augustness. Makenna is here now, waiting outside, with a criminal who volunteered to confront his own soul and his guilt."

"Very well," she told him. "Bring them in."

As the Kampaku silently gestured with his hand, the Abbot Myoju and Prince Konoye looked dubiously at one another, but neither said a word.

Immediately, two men entered. The first, Makenna, was massive; his eyes, a fierce, smoky gray, harked back to his First Ancestors. He strode into the center of the hall and bowed toward the Throne.

The man with him did not stride; he shambled, cloaked in shame, pupils dilated, mouth hanging loose, looking neither to left nor right but at the floor. Makenna had to prod him into bowing.

"Address the Throne, *sensei*," said Prince Saionji.

Makenna spoke. He said the criminal's name was Saito. He had been a science teacher in a middle school. He had been passed over for advancement, and he had slain the man responsible, burning him to death in his own laboratory and trying to make the act seem like a spontaneous explosion, an accident.

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"He is the first criminal to try his own case with the device I have contrived," declared Makenna proudly. "Tell us about it, Saito!"

Saito wept. His arms twitched. He trembled.

"Tell us!"

"I — I looked into the mirror," Saito said, voice barely audible. "I — I was plunged inside, hovering — over — over a pit. Seeing only myself and Tojima's corpse. His — his burned corpse. Then I—" Abruptly his voice rose almost to a scream. "Then I inflicted punishment upon myself. For — for a thousand years I — I suffered! Till I was purged, purged, *purged!*"

The Empress Suiko leaned forward. "Would you do such a murderous deed again, Saito?"

Saito could not speak. Sobbing, he shook his head.

Makenna gestured for him to be led away. "He says he suffered for a thousand years," he told the Empress. "He will not even tell what punishment it was that he inflicted on himself. But he confronted my device for three hours only. It took no more time than that. And there can be no doubt, none at all, that he at least is rehabilitated."

"And do you think, Makenna-*sensei*, that your device is ready now for general use? Do you believe we can use it safely on all criminals?"

"August Sovereign," Makenna said, his voice suddenly low, "I would not like to assume that responsibility. While I have confidence in the device, we must remember that I myself do not yet fully understand its functioning. I can repeat that it brings a man face to face with his Buddha-self, or so it seems. I cannot tell how or why. If I were to decide, I would want to learn these things first."

"Makenna-*sensei* is a man of pure science, Augustness." Tokimasa's countenance showed his irritation. "It is natural for him to be cautious. But we are in a situation where caution may be fatal. We cannot let things go on as they are — nor, even more, as they will soon become. We must solve our problem *now* — and this device is the solution."

The Empress looked at him. She looked at the Abbot Myoju and at Prince Konoye. The Abbot nodded, as though reluctantly. Konoye gravely shook his head.

"Fujiwara no Tokimasa," said the Empress Suiko, "are you willing to assume responsibility for the success or failure of this measure if the Council agrees to it and if you receive permission from the Throne?"

"I am!"

"Then let the Concil be convened immediately. Confer with them. Inform them fully, as you have informed me." She thanked Makenna graciously for coming; she thanked Tokimasa for bringing him. She dismissed them all, all except Prince Saionji, the Abbot, and Konoye no Masashige. When the hall was empty, she spoke to them. "We all have doubts," she said, "but

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what else can we do?"

"We can abandon our seclusion," Konoye answered. "We can once more dare the Universe."

"I agree," said Prince Saionji. "Once again, we can go voyaging through Gilpin's Space."

"I am uneasy," declared the Abbot. "As Makenna said, we know neither what his device does nor how it does it. But events compel me to agree with Tokimasa."

Fujiwara no Tokimasa acted vigorously. The Council was convened. Saito was again exhibited. Tokimasa presented his case forcefully and eloquently. Two hours later, he was again received in audience and reported that the Council had been almost unanimous in favor of the measure. The Empress, true to her word, gave him full authority.

When everything is automated, when technology has reached a level of sophistication where there literally can be no shortages of materials or finished products, the quick mass-production of a new device presents only petty problems. Within three weeks, Tokimasa had an adequate supply of Makenna's "mirrors" at his disposal; within four, they had been installed in processing centers, in old school buildings, in what had been apartment houses before Yamato had outgrown hive-living. Tokimasa had established them wherever crime had erupted most dangerously, but the largest, the one in which he was most interested, was on Nara's outskirts, in an ancient, bleak warren of a warehouse whose original purpose had been forgotten. Each of its cold cubicles held a chair, a table, one of the mirrors, and — completely out of sight — the half-understood equipment that actuated it.

Tokimasa's was the responsibility, and no one interfered with him. It was a time of pilgrimage; the solemn, joyous time when, once every eight years, the Sovereign and her court left Nara to visit every major capital and each important shrine on every continent, celebrating those myths around which the lovely, complex structure of Yamato had been woven. Their progress was slow and decorous, by land and sea rather than by air, savoring the joys of travel, of the nautral beauty that was their planet's own, and of the beauty their ancestors had brought and planted there and willed to them. Whispers reached them of crimes steady increase; there were incidents, sparked primarily by the pseudo-Nichiren; but nothing occurred to mar the ceremonial majesty of their journey; on the surface, the Throne remained sacrosanct. And the reports they received from Tokimasa, both as Kampaku and as their general in the war against threatened chaos, were brief and always favorable. But underneath it all was mounting uneasiness.

On the thirtieth day, as the shadows lengthened, the Empress and Prince Saionji, having supped, sat alone before the villa where they were

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resting. Winds sighed through the pines and in the fronds, and at the garden's end a rocky stream sang its gentle song.

The Empress looked at him, at his unconcealed concern. She placed one hand softly on his knee. "Tell me," she said. "Tell me why you are worried. I can see you are, despite Tokimasa's favorable reports."

He placed his hand on hers. "Yes," he told her. "More so than I can say. We who have been in Gilpin's Space — and now I speak not only of our close patrols around this system, but of my much longer journey to Old Earth — we learn to sense, to hear, to feel those strangenesses that come from lifeforms other than our own; beings so alien that even after we become accustomed to their shrieking terrors, their shocking lusts, their unattainable and unimaginable aspirations, we cannot begin to comprehend them. We have known all this, from our ancestral records — but it is not the same. Gilpin's Space sings, howls, vibrates, trembles with their thoughts and feelings; distance seems to make no difference. And to stay sane in Gilpin's Space one must become transparent to them, never allowing oneself to react to them. That is why, as I discovered on Old Earth, those who can really master this have been few in number and now are considered almost a new race — the Far Outers. It is they who have changed Earth, so that Earth too we can no longer understand. But I have told you this for one reason only. Those of use who have survived the depths of Gilpin's Space can sense emotions far more clearly than we could before, and—" He broke off. His hand tightened almost convulsively on hers. "My love, my Sovereign! Something is terribly wrong on our Yamato. I feel it everywhere we go. The facade is nothing; the rottenness is underneath. And since Tokimasa began using Makenna's mirrors, it becomes more and more intense. Crime is a symptom, not the disease. We must look more deeply. I myself — as you know, I agree with Masashige, that wise old man. I think we must abandon our seclusion, to learn what the rest of the far-flung human race can give us and what we can give them in return."

"You trouble me," she told him, "and I am glad you do, for that too is part of the duty of a Sovereign. I myself have thought I felt a heightening tension, a swelling undercurrent of distrust and fear, but I told myself it was imagination — it was more comfortable to think so." She uttered an icicle of laughter. "Well, let us consult the Abbot Myoju and Konoye no Masashige and lay our plans. A month remains of our pilgrimage; unless utter disaster strikes we cannot cut it short. But—" She freed her hand and rose imperiously. "—but we can prepare immediately to probe into what Makenna's mirror has been doing. Perhaps it is not all as simple and straightforward as Tokimasa says."

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The month passed slowly, increasing apprehension weighing down the dragging hours and minutes; and the reports that began coming in as a result of their own discreet enquiry and those initiated by the Abbot and Masashige were more and more disquieting. Then, three days before the month's end, Makenna called, requesting permission to present a memorial to the Throne. It at once was granted.

He did not use the communications system. Instead, he wrote it personally, on paper, and sent a trusted pupil with it, apologizing because he could not leave the task he had been given and come himself.

The memorial was detailed and to the point. It gave the number of offenders who had been forced to judge themselves and impose punishment, and the number of those who had come through the ordeal no worse off than Saito — and of those who had become completely catatonic, or gone insane, or died before the mirror, or killed themselves. Makenna recalled his own reluctance but stated also that even he had never anticipated results as harsh as those they had obtained. He declared that there had been little apparent correlation between the crime and the criminal's fate. He petitioned the Throne to halt the use of his device immediately.

The Empress Suiko listened as Prince Saionji read it to her. Twice more, she read it through again. "It is strange," she said, "that he has not mentioned what sort of punishment it is that these people have inflicted on themselves. It is even stranger that he says nothing of any attempt to determine what it is."

The Prince nodded. "That is strange indeed. After all, for centuries our therapists have had mind-scanners that enable them to share what goes on in men's minds. Even though they have been of little use where the cause of crime is concerned, surely they could give us information about what happens when a man confronts his conscience before a mirror — unless, of course, their use has been forbidden to Makenna."

"It will no longer be forbidden, then," the Empress stated. "And it will be better for Fujiwara no Tokimasa if he has a ready explanation."

She summoned Makenna's pupil, told him to inform his *sensei* that the memorial had been received and read and that he was to take no further action until her own return, when the Throne would take direct control.

On their return to Nara, she did not hesitate. Within the hour, Tokimasa had been ordered to present himself before her; and he arrived to find her formally seated in the hall of audience, flanked by her husband and attended by the Ministers of the Left and Right. One glance informed him that now he himself would be on trial.

The Empress gestured to the Abbot, who took Makenna's memorial from his sleeve and read it through.

"Is that clear?" she asked Tokimasa.

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"It is clear, Augustness," he answered, his face darkening. "But it is also sheer idiocy. The punishment has been made to fit the crime, as the book from Old Earth said. What that punishment may be does not matter, and if in so many cases it seems to us to be out of all proportion, it is because we do not, and cannot know the full extent of the crimes committed. Only the criminal himself can know that. That is why we can now, for the first time in man's history, administer perfect justice. I respectfully suggest that no further action be taken in this matter, that our successful program suffer no interference and no further questioning, and that Makenna-*sensei* be reproved by the Throne for his effrontery."

"The suggestion," said the Empress coldly, "is refused." She leaned forward slightly, fixing him with her great eyes. "Has any attempt been made to determine what these punishments have been?" she demanded. "Has the mind-scanner been used?"

"It would be an invasion of privacy," Tokimasa answered, almost with a sneer. "Are you aware, Augustness, that the use of the mind-scanner is permitted only to therapists and — except in the case of the hopelessly insane — only with consent?"

"I know that, Tokimasa. I also am aware that a great many of those who have faced the mirror have *become* hopelessly insane." She stood. "The Throne now takes control. As soon as a mind-scanner can be procured, we will discover what has happened and what is happening. You will attend us. So will Makenna-*sensei*. So will the Abbot Myoju and Prince Konoye."

"Augustness," said Tokimasa, taut with anger, "we are at war. We are warring against crime, against forces blindly seeking to destroy the civilization of Yamato. What does it matter if the criminals perish, or go mad, or torture themselves to death? Justice is done, and Yamato will be saved. As Kampaku and director of this project, I protest the step you propose to take!"

"It will be taken nonetheless. We will arrive at your center within the hour." She clapped her hands for the computer hologram and gave her orders. "And you, Tokimasa," she commanded, "will attend us here at the Palace and go with us. Please wait outside."

And Tokimasa bowed and turned abruptly and left the chamber.

The day was cold, with a chill drizzle. No flying creatures moved or sang, and the tree fronds, gray with cold, sagged unhappily. The center, as the ground-cars from the Palace drew up in front of it, seemed even more forbidding, conveying the impression of long abandonment and of an unwilling resurrection. It was long and squat and gray, poured originally of a now long-outmoded gray ceramic. Prince Saionji, looking at it, thought of it instantly as a place of pain.

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Makenna, with half a dozen helpers, was waiting for them at the door. So were the two therapists summoned by the Empress. They carried their mind-scanner in a lacquer box reminiscent of those in which, in ancient times, precious porcelains and other fine things had been stored. Even it would never be permitted to expose its technological anatomy.

They entered. The corridor was long and dismal, with cold shadows and hints of colder damp. Door after door opened at either side.

"Is this where they are?" the Empress asked.

"Yes, Augustness," Makenna answered.

"It is so silent," she said, shuddering.

"Yes, Augustness."

"Find me one who is catatonic," she ordered, silencing Tokimasa's protest before he could utter it.

They continued on. Then Makenna stopped before a door. "His name is Nakamura Hankei," he told them. "Together, he and a woman whom he slept with strangled her husband. There was no doubt about their guilt. There was reason also to suspect that he had committed other crimes."

He threw the door open. In the half-light, lying on a pallet, they saw a naked man. He lay as though frozen there, and the expression on his face was one of utter anguish.

The Empress Suiko lifted a hand to her lips involuntarily, quelling an almost inaudible small cry; and Makenna, concern in his voice, said, "Augustness, I do not know what we will see when the mind-scanner is turned on. I am afraid it will not be pleasant. Are you sure you will want to watch? We can do this before your husband and the Ministers. We can report to you—"

She interrupted him. "This man is *my* subject. You may proceed."

The therapists entered. They placed their anachronistic lacquered case beside the pallet. They stepped back. One of them clapped his hands. Over the dreadful figure, the computer's hologram appeared. And suddenly they — all of them — stood in what appeared to be a vaulted cave, a cavern stretching endlessly over an endless lake, dark red, so dark that it was almost black. Cold, wet black clouds licked at its surface hungrily, and the light upon it was only a colder, lesser darkness. A slaughterhouse stench rose from it, overpoweringly.

At its very center, close to them, Nakamura stood. Only his head and shoulders were above the surface. His head and shoulders, and his hands. His hands were at his mouth. They held a dark, ragged something at each end. His mouth held it by its middle.

He was completely motionless.

There was a cry of horror, broken off. There was an endless instant of shock, revulsion, pity, of emotions too profound, too suddenly devastating.

And still he did not move.

"What *is* it?" cried the Empress,

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and the Abbot Myoju answered her. He spoke extremely slowly, as though each word had to be carefully formed and then forced past his lips.

"He is standing in a lake of blood," he said. *"He is standing in a lake of blood, chewing hair."*

"Impossible!" protested Tokimasa hoarsely. "He — he does not even move!"

"No," said the Abbot, "not to our eyes. We have been told that there are many hells — hot hells and cold, and such things as the world of *pretas*, hungry ghosts. The hell in which Nakamura finds himself has been described."

"But he does not *move!*"

"That is because his time is not ours. His time is an eternity. That is how long he has condemned himself to suffer there. If you could photograph his image for a week, a month, a year, then speed up the recording, perhaps you could see his jaw move a millimeter, his hands clench on the hank of hair. Remember, Saito said that he himself suffered a thousand years."

"Yet he — he condemned *himself!*" Now Tokimasa's voice was shrill. "It is terrible — but who can say it is unjust?"

"If we were certain that he did indeed condemn himself, you would be right. But now I am absolutely sure that he did *not*. Karma is not a simple thing. There is good karma, and there is bad. We know that it works very slowly, over uncounted lifetimes, and I suspect that our hells are never entered until the weight of the bad karma becomes so great that those lifetimes are not enough. That, I think, is rare." Sadly, the Abbot Myoju shook his head. "It is my opinion, because of the large number of offenders who have fallen victim to Makenna's mirror—" He pointed through the edges of the hologram at the object on the cubicle's small table, for all the world like an antique mirror of cast bronze. "—that this does not bring a man face to face with his own Buddha-self. Instead, it confronts him with a karmic overload of the bad only, as though the balance of good and evil did not exist, its intensity depending solely on his sins."

Once more they looked at Nakamura in his lake of blood. Then the Empress, ashen-faced, ordered the mind-scanner to be turned off. "We have seen enough," she said, as the hologram disappeared. "How many more are there as bad as this?"

Makenna said he did not know, but he gave her the number of those for whom he held no hope.

"What will become of them?" she asked.

"Perhaps," replied the Abbot, "death will restore the balance, letting them back into the karmic stream."

There was silence. Tokimasa stood there, tortured, staring at the figure on the bed. Tears ran unheeded down his heavy face. "Surely that passage in the book from Earth was — was more than mere coincidence? *It* spoke of making punishment fit the crime. That was

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why I was so *sure*."

"Ah!" Prince Konoye answered him. "But what *was* the crime? I myself think it was our too-long abandonment of the human race — that race which the Lord Buddha came to save — and that our punishment is what has happened to Yamato and what we now see here."

"But I — *I* am responsible for *this*," Tokimasa cried. "It was *my* rashness, *my* insistence that condemned these — these —" His voice broke. "Oh, *Akitsumikami*, I am to blame, and I am ashamed. Condemn me! Punish me as you will!"

The voice of the Empress Suiko sang out as though it could triumph over the sight she'd seen. "I shall not punish you, Tokimasa. I shall have other things to do. From this moment on, Yamato shall follow a new course. We shall begin by building ships to dare Gilpin's Space!" She turned. "Come, let us be on our way. Makenna-*sensei*, during the next few days you will attend to closing this place down. This one and all like it! Come!"

Fujiwara no Tokimasa did not stir.

"Tokimasa?"

He bowed his head. "August Sovereign, I have offended greatly. I am no longer fit to be Kampaku. How many have I, out of willfulness, plunged into eternities of suffering? I — I cannot come with you."

For moments, the Empress Suiko looked at him sadly and in silence, and at the room, the tortured man lying on the pallet, the device fashioned by Makenna.

"I think I understand," she finally said, "though I would rather not. No, you cannot come. Your place is here. This is now a matter between you — and your conscience."

Coming Soon

Next month: a brand-new story of magic and adventure titled TALISMAN by **Larry Niven** and **Dian Girard**, along with another in **Stephen King's** series, THE GUNSLINGER AND THE DARK MAN. Soon: new stories by **Joanna Russ, Bob Leman, Rudy Rucker, Ron Goulart,** plus several newly discovered Varkela stories by the late **Susan Petrey**.

The November issue is on sale October 1.

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Avram Davidson assures us that the conditions under which Prof. Hepgood are housed are not at all identical with the conditions under which Avram Davidson has been housed at any university where he has been writer-in-residence. And, after adding that, nevertheless, he knows whereof he speaks, *Avram declares that he has never been at either the University of Wittenberg or that of Cracow....*

The Ape

BY

AVRAM DAVIDSON

The man came into the room and took a step or two towards the desk in the corner. It was high-piled with books and papers. Some of the papers were typed, some were in longhand. Pens, a few of them capped, and pencils in two or three colors, lay on top of the papers. In the background was the sound of water running. "Forgot to jiggle the damned thing again," the man said. He half turned. Then he sighed. "Hell with it," he said, and sat down on the sofa, which made a noise of its own, and he pressed a tab on a device.

Without any prologue his television screen went from blank into chaos and flux, first of a most familiar sort and then of a most unfamiliar sort; next the screen cleared with an extraordinary clarity and showed what was perhaps an animal from a nature show, although the TV schedule, to which the man gave an annoyed glance, indicated none such. And the animal gazed at the man, and the background on the screen was odd and curious and extremely so.

"Too small for a gorilla," the man said. "Too small for a gorilla." He often repeated his own words. "Too big for a, oh, *gib*bon? An orang — uh ... uh ... not squat enough. Ba*boon?* Nope. A chimp? A ... oh, hell, *I* give up, what are you?"

And the creature said, as though it were the most natural thing in the world for such a conversation to take place and it to have the power of speech, "I am that same great old ape which offered its hand to Dr. Faustus. And he refused it." The voice was both high-pitched and husky and only somewhat quavery; its accent was odd but easily understood.

"Where was *this?*" the man asked.

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A can of beer sat on the soggy arm of the dingy sofa. And the great old ape told him that "some said" this was in Dr. Faustus's own hall near the University of Wittenberg, but that they lied who said so and that it was instead near the University of Cracow, which he (the great old ape) described, vividly, though whether accurately or otherwise is not for us to say, though we may hazard, as "a sewer of many devils."

"And he refused it," the animal repeated.

The man sighed and considered turning to another channel, but, it happening that there was then available neither a talk-show nor girls in wet T-shirts, forbore. He reached for his can of beer; his can of beer was warm; after a moment he gestured instead towards the papers on his desk. "'*The Dark Ages were really misnomered, being illuminated by the fires of the Spanish inquisitioning.*' You like history? From a student in the second year of college. What kind of a *mark* would you give that one? 'Buy sound common stocks,' my uncle said, when he signed over my trust fund, but, no, *I* had to piss it away on grad school." He sighed. "You are *who?*" he asked. "*What* famous old ape?"

"That same great old ape which offered its hand to Dr. Faustus."

The man cleared his throat. "Who refused it. The prick." He sighed and seemed to think a bit, and said, "Yeah, I sort of remember now, where did I read it, his name or should I say your name ... name was Benedick or Dominick or was it or is it Habbakuck...?"

"Some say," said the beast. The beast, whose head had nodded a few times, perhaps in agreement or perhaps from great age, pursued for a moment a flea or a flake of salt sweat, then looked up at the man again, and directly into his eyes. Then it held forth its hand.

"Too heavy on the interdisciplinary studies, trouble with Faustus," the man uttered. He concentrated on the hand, which was rather near in front of him, and he mumbled the word *Holography*. "Probably in a minute my phone will ring and they'll tell me I was chosen to take part in an experiment. Oh, well, and what the hell. So Dr. Faustus *wouldn't*." The man sighed again, for he sighed a great deal, and he leaned forward and made a gesture with his own hand towards that of the great old ape, and, actually, their hands did not as it were pass through each other, nor were they impeded by the television screen: their hands met, there was *no* electric-like shock, merely the man felt the warm clasp of flesh and rough pads for a moment, hairs atop and bones inside; then their hands loosened one from the other.

"Oh, well, what the *Hell*," the man said again. He looked towards the phone and cupped his ear. After a moment he said, "Hmmm. Well, then, *what?*"

Habbakuck or Dominick (or per-

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haps Benedick) gazed round about the man's room, his teeth chattered a bit, just a bit, perhaps in perplexity, perhaps in displeasure; he said, "I had understood that you were a Doctor in Philosophy at a university, and yet your chamber, for hall I cannot term it, seems furnished neither richly nor in full; on the other hand, neither is it the cell of an anchorite nor an ascetic. Pray explain to me." An instant later he added, "For I am your unfamiliar."

Dr. Mortimer Hepgood (our account has not sought to conceal his name from you; it is that the matter has not come up till now) uttered one of his sighs. "You certainly *are*," he said. "*Well.* I have this contract with this University. This University in this contract styles and terms me as 'vendor.' Do you get that) Did they used to do that at Cracow or Wurtemburg, pardon me, *Wittenberg*? Not, mind you, as *'scholar,'* no, nor even *'the party of the second part.' Uh*-uh. *'Vendor!' Me;* the guy who delivers the chickenshit for the campus lawn; the man who supplies *laundry* — all of us. *Ven*dor. Nice, huh? They do *that* at Cracow?"

"A sewer of many devils...."

"Well, this University, an organ of a Public Entity, as another of its favorite phrases goes, to wit, this *State*, maintains what it calls Maintenance Policy. Maintenance Policy is that I have been issued the full supply of furnishing fitting for a Ph.D. who has neither *Tenure* — which means that I could not be fired out of hand, as I could now — nor whose job is *Tenure-track*. I must apologize for the barbarous locution, *'Tenure-track,'* meaning 'in line to receive *Tenure*,' but such is the vocabulary, or, if you will, the jargon, argot, or cant, currently in use and fashion amongst the Groves of Academe: *hence* the rug of the color called (though maybe not by rug-merchants) landlord-green, whose most tattered and torn portion is concealed beneath the dog-puke-puce sofa, which is actually a fold-away bed — and hence the chairs whose seats are mended with masking tape, the ghastly ghouldscape in the chipped frame, the scrofulous...." He paused. He sighed. The great old ape stayed silent, though now and then it scratched its axillae.

Said Dr. Hepgood, "And I may add that not I nor any other faculty member of this Public Entity-owned University who lacks *Tenure* or *Tenure-track* is permitted to remove or *durst* remove from the premises *any* of these furnished articles or artifacts, and in fact twice in each term I have to sign an inventory which is brought here by a member of an ethnic group formerly underprivileged although possessed of a very *rich* culture of its own and who now bears the title of Assistant Associated Coordinator of Maintenance — where the fuck *was* I? — ah, yes, he comes with a list on a clipboard and, as he puts it, 'is obliged to check and have me sign the inventory according to the appropriate statute.' Of course none of

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this crap would fetch jack-*shit* at a garage sale....

"— who pays for *your* use of not-quite prime time, may I ask, er, Hucklebuck?"

"'Habbakuck,'" the great old ape corrected him, in an absent-minded tone, as he scratched an axilla. And then asked, "Does this Assistant Associated Coordinator have *Tenure-track?*"

"Oh hell no. He has *Tenure.*"

At this the beast gathered his aged limbs and gave himself a shake. "I have been out of junction with your world a long time. Is your lack of these honors, *Tenure* and *Tenure-track,* due to your having defended with insufficient authorities or inadequate arguments your dissertation before the rectors, proctors, consuls, and adepts of the University's Faculty?"

Dr. Hepgood gave a little laugh. He reached for his can of beer; his can of beer was warm. "Oh, we don't do things that way anymore, Hack. We are required to issue a certain number of publications, Huck, 'Publish or perish,' as the phrase is, and some of them have to be *books,* you know. Which I *have.* But, well, Hank, there is more to it even than *that.* See, at least one of these books *must* have on the back of the dust jacket (the paper cover over the whole book, I mean), on the *back,* of the *dust* jacket, at least one of the books has got to have a picture of the writer, the author, holding a pipe in one hand....

"See?"

Habbakuck the great old ape shuffled his haunches and shifted his rump and muttered, somewhat crossly, "Always in dealing with these learned doctors one is obliged to say to them, 'Define your terms, define your *terms!*' A pipe, a pipe: A measure or container of wine? A tube for blowing vessels of glass? A musical instrument, as it might be, a syrinx or flageolet?"

Dr. Mortimer Hepgood laughed at short length, then explained that by *pipe* was meant a pipe consisting of a cup or "bowl" situate at approximately right angle to tube and commonly now made of wood but once commonly of clay and in which (in the "bowl") an herb, *tobacco,* was ignited and its fumes inhausted via the tube through the mouth. "Ah," said the great old ape (Dr. Faustus had refused to take his hand). Dr. Mortimer Hepgood laughed another short laugh and enlarged his explanation: that, in addition to such licit pipes there were pipes non-licit in which were enfumed substances even less licit. "Ah," said the great old ape.

"I had wondered much," said he, "*why* writers have to be depicted holding pipes for smoking. Now I believe I see. Dr. Albertus Magnus had one such," said he; "by means of it he enfumed the burning seeds of henbane, a most dangerous substance, his excuse being that it relieved aches in his teeth, to which thesis he cited in defense Pliny the Elder and sundry others; what time he, aforesaid Doctor Alber-

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tus Magnus, had finished his infumations he would, were I there, and often I was, gaze upon *me*, and mutter, 'I am, have been, or shall be, in Hell.'" The great old ape Dominick, or Benedick or Habbakuck said again the word "Ah!" several times in such rapid succession that it seemed almost he barked. Or, laughed. Then he mused some moments more, his grizzled muzzle held in his hand.

"So, just in case you were wondering," Hepgood said, "how come there are all these goddamn photos on dustjackets of all these goddamn writers holding *pipes* in their goddamn hands —"

"We were not wondering," said his unfamiliar. Adding, "— about that." Still he sat a while; then spoke. "Thus it is, then, if an adept or scholar of the degree of Doctor has had sundry books emprinted upon and by a press or presses and if at least one of these books (and I doubt not that they are very learned books indeed) bears upon it a coverlet of paper and on the back of this a portrait of said scholar holding in his hand a tobacco-pipe, this author and scholar will then be granted by his Faculty and University these utile honors called *Tenure-track* and/or *Tenure?* So he be not easily cast forth from his employment?"

"Yeah," said Hepgood. "*U*sually. — Otherwise: *no.*"

"And if this is done, then such a one will be granted a greater chamber, even an hall, with seemlier furnitures?"

"Right on, Hab."

"And you wish this done?"

"Oh, you bet your li'l bestial ol' bottom I wish this done. But, well, the *pub*lishers —"

The great old ape waved the hand which Dr. John Faustus had refused to take. "Then it will be done," he said. "It is being done. *Now*. In effect, retroactively, it has been done."

Silence.

Dr. Hepgood sank somewhat further down into the sunken side of his moldering sofa. "Now just a minute here, uh, *Hunk*," he said. "Anything as dreary as a deal with the Devil would make me a laughing-stock amongst the faculty. And all the born-again students, many of whom are very *large* young men and women holding athletic scholarships, they would at the very least burn me in effigy. And who knows if they would stop there?"

The great old ape, who had begun to show signs of impatience, weariness, annoyance, and fatigue, waited however till Dr. Hepgood was done. Then he said, in the manner of an old-style predicant pleading points of logic with his congregation, "Firstly, I am not the Devil. Secondly, I do not desire your body or your soul, nor did I desire those of Professor John Faustus, D.D.; I desired only to shake hands. For, thirdly, I desire *always* to shake hands. Such is my manner and wont, for I have an affinity to clasp the grasp of high scholars, and who can say or indeed *need* say why I am so inclined? I

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am an ape (noun) and it is my nature to ape (verb); I see it done and I desire to do it; enough. Fourthly, when the hands were shaken, the deal was maken. *Made*. Struck. Only the details remained to be arranged, *videlicet*, you on your part receive *Tenure-track;* I on my part receive a mention in your book — I have *always* desired mentions in the books of men, and yet it is *so* difficult and they are *so* rare! — a mere footnote will do; and, fifthly, has already been done — page 325, the chapter ending high upon the right-hand side with plenty of space for a nice long footnote." And the great old ape Habbakuck, Dominick, or Benedick, recited the contents of the footnote in detail, with copious references to incunables in the Vatican, Uppsala, Widener, and other libraries; plus microfiche copies thereof available from Esselte Video, Incorporated, for mere ly nominal sums in Swiss Francs: there was a knock on the door; the television screen went blank and then began to display a hockey game in West Winnipeg, sans sound.

"Come in," called Hepgood, who could not think of anything else to call.

In came a *very* well-dressed man carrying a clipboard; "Well, here I am again, Dr. Hepgood: Crispus A. Castro, Assistant Associated Coordinator of Maintenance, and, say, I want to congratulate you on your new volume which I happened to see just now in the window of College Books as I was coming by —"

Dr. Hepgood said he thanked him very much. But —

"*Very* nice picture of you, didn't know you smoked a pipe; *well:* reason I'm here ahead of my usual time schedule, Doctor, your Department has informed the Dean of Faculty that your *job's* now become *Tenure-track*, and, as you know, or maybe you didn't, the Tables of Organization for your Department already has its full compliments of *Tenure-track* faculty members, at any rate since the latest cutbacks which will be announced shortly: *So*, since your contract under these circumstances is self-terminating, you having become supernumerary, here I am again, obliged to check the inventory according to the appropriate statute and have you sign it as usual before you move out — this weekend will be okay, won't it? — so let's *see* now: One carpet, Grade D, green: *check*. One sofa, from Old Warehouse, puce: Uh-huh: *check*. *Two* chairs, superannuated from Dorm Three, repaired: *check*...."

Dr. Hepgood reached for his can of beer. His can of beer was warm.

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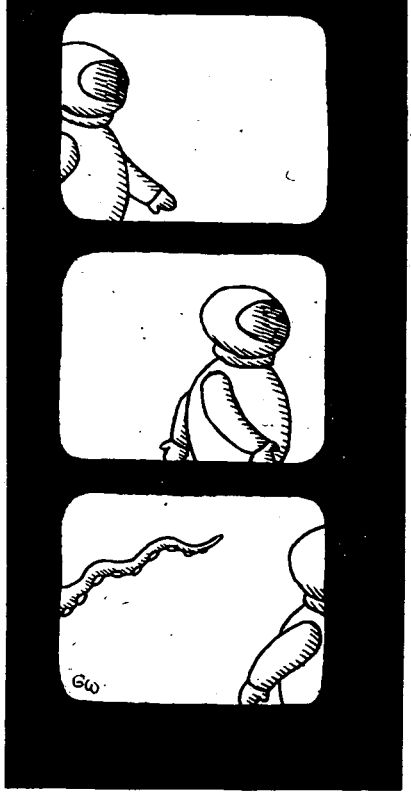
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

ANOTHER EMPIRE HEARD FROM

Last month I commented on the fact that pure fantasy (heroic fantasy, sword and sorcery, call it what you will) seems to have risen to the surface of mass acceptance, as witness two recent films.

We coped with *Excalibur* then; this month, to carry on the point, I'd like to wax a little more enthusiastic about the made-for-TV *Fugitive From the Empire*, though not its title — *empire* now seems a code word, as contemporary jargon puts it, for s/f-fantasy.

But I did like the film — quite a bit, in fact. While watching it, I had the same feeling, to a lesser degree, as I had with *Star Wars*, one of seeing on screen for the first time things that I had only read about up to that point.

First and foremost, it was set in a created world having nothing to do with our history or geography (the TV Guide synopsis called it "another planet," but there was no interior evidence to support this). There is a malefic Empire in the background, but most of the people we're concerned with are semi-barbarians.

The plot was incredibly convoluted, having to do with the son of a leader who had just managed to unite the five tribes of the barbarian nomads, but is then murdered most foully. Toran, the son, is accused of the murder and exiled; he goes in search of a mysterious wizard figure, accompanied by

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one faithful retainer who owns a weapon of power, a bow that is magically linked to the psyche of its owner.

Also searching for the same figure, to revenge the death of her mother, is a sort of priestess lady, who tends to turn into a panther at moments of stress.

They are both pursued by forces of the Empire, for reasons that escape me at the moment, but I'm sure they were good ones. And along the way, they fall in with an anti-hero, a rogue named Slant, who claims that everything he does is for mercenary gain, but we know he's a good guy deep down.

After various adventures (during which Toran's retainer is killed and the magic bow is transferred to him), they confront a person they think to be the object of their quest in a mysterious other-dimensional space. But it is not him, and they're off again. There is obviously more to come of this saga.

None of this is new, though it is original material, i.e., not adapted from a written source. But it *is* new to the screen, and made precious few concessions to those who do not know the genre. I liked that quality, and I also liked the thrown-away casualness of the special effects, which certainly gave the idea that magic was part of this world, and did not exactly attract a crowd every time it manifested itself.

There was also some neat filming that did *not* go the overwrought, comic strip way of *Excalibur*. One shot, of far mountains with lightning playing around them, and the sinister half-snake, half-human soldiers of the Empire combing the foreground for Toran, was spectacularly effective.

I'm not claiming greatness for *Fugitive From the Empire* — in particular, I must fault some of the dialogue and much of the acting. But it *was* extraordinarily original for the medium, a lot of fun, and made no pretensions beyond that, as opposed to the other fantasy about that sword.

Things-to-come dept.... As you might guess, there are a number of fantasy films upcoming ... *Conan*, of course, which having encountered all sorts of delays in filming, is in the works again ... Something called *Cat People*, described as "a contemporary erotic fantasy inspired by the horror classic" ... Peter Straub's *Ghost Story* ... Another Muppet movie ... *Heartbeeps*, with Bernadette Peters (a lady I like a lot) as one of a star-crossed pair of robots ... And a Rankin-Bass production (animated, of course) of *The Last Unicorn*. The screenplay is by Peter S. Beagle, the author, which holds out some hope. However, what was done to Tolkien by those producers is going to take a lot of forgiving.

VCR dept.... I will try as much as possible to keep up on the latest science fiction and fantasy releases as they appear on prerecorded cassette, no easy task given the chaotic state of the burgeoning video tape industry. I'll also try to give a capsule comment on what does become available, as one might

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handle reprints in a book review column. This month add the first *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* to the catalog. It's tighter and more compact than the sprawling later version, nicely filmed in '50s fashion (it was released in 1956), but still is sabotaged by a terrible flaw in logic in the last reel (from which the later version also suffered, but *not* the novel, a good example of Hollywood script-writing playing hob with the consistency so necessary to s/f).

And I found it interesting that on a recent best-seller list of video cassette movies, nine out of the 20 were science fiction, fantasy, or horror.

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George Martin, who won Hugos in 1979 for best short story ("The Way of Cross and Dragon") and best novelet ("Sandkings"), offers a gripping new story about a free-lance writer who discovers an unsettling pattern in a series of disappearances in his Chicago neighborhood.

The Needle Men

BY

GEORGE R. R. MARTIN

Living in Uptown, Jerry had seen a lot of things never dreamt of in places like Forest Park and Wilmette. But he had learned to mind his own business as well. So it was no wonder that he hardly thought twice about the guy with the needle until he bumped into the cops on the steps of his building.

He hadn't really seen anything suspicious, after all. It was a Friday night when it happened, and Jerry had been down on Rush Street, checking out the action at some singles bars, with a notable lack of success. He'd had a few Michelobs too many and was close to getting sloshed. So when the cute brunette he'd been talking to went off with someone else, he made up his mind to call it a night. He rode the el back to Argyle, staring pensively out at the weathered sooty brick and grey windows of the buildings near the tracks, blinking whenever blue-white sparks came crackling off the third rail to etch hard, intense shadows on the tenement walls.

From the Argyle el stop it was a short walk to the six-flat where Jerry shared an apartment with three roommates. Even at midnight, Argyle was lively: country music blasted out the open doors of redneck bars; dim female silhouettes writhed in the windows of the strip joints; the 24-hour coffee shops were open and crowded. Jerry had to step over one derelict, passed out in front of a grocery store. A second sidled up to him by the drugstore, mumbling something in a rasping boozy voice, but he shied off when Jerry threw him a look. It was that kind of neighborhood. "Yeasty," Jerry liked to call it; hillbillies and Hispanics and blacks and a lot of Orientals, pushed together cheek-to-jowl and hating every minute of it. On the other side of

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Sheridan, alnog Marine Drive, the high-rises stood, full of young marrieds and singles. Respectability was kind of nibbling at the edges of the area, chewing up the old overcrowded tenements and spitting out renovated condos, but Jerry figured the process of digestion would take a long, long time.

In the meantime, rents were cheap, at least by Chicago standards. Jerry was a struggling free-lance journalist, so cheap mattered. Besides, he figured he needed to see the seamy side of life, seething and bubbling, and Uptown had plenty of that.

The shortest way from the el to his building cut through an alley just on the far side of Sheridan and brought him up the back stairs. The alley was dark, but that had long since stopped bothering him; you only had to look at him to know Jerry wasn't worth mugging. So that Friday night he ducked into the alley, as he had a thousand times before, and that was where he saw the guy with the hypo.

There wasn't much to it. The guy was shutting the trunk of his car, a battered old black Javelin, just as Jerry came around the corner and started towards the rickety wooden staircase at the back of his six-flat. Jerry didn't see him very well and didn't try. Just a white guy, youngish, with a little dark mustache, wearing one of those sports coats with leather patches at the elbows. He and Jerry traded a brief, wary glance, the way two strangers will when they meet in an alley in Uptown, and then the guy started around the car to the driver's side. As he did, he slid something into his jacket pocket, and Jerry glimpsed it briefly: a hypodermic needle. He thought nothing of it. The neighborhood was full of junkies.

As he climbed wearily up the stairs to the back door of his third-floor apartment, he heard the car growl and turn over below him, and the headlights speared out and lit up the alley for a few moments. Jerry was pleased. He was just drunk enough so that he was having difficulty getting his key into the lock, and the light helped. "Ah-*ha*," he said, pushing it in and turning. By the time the door closed behind him, the Javelin was gone.

Jerry didn't give the incident another thought until the night the cops arrived.

It was near dusk. He'd eaten at a Siamese restaurant down south of Lawrence and was walking back, savoring the coolness of the evening. Coming up from the south like he was brought him to the front of his building, but long before he got there he saw there was commotion. A cop car was sitting right outside his door, a crowd had gathered around the steps, and two cops were trying to calm down some crazy lady. When he got closer, he saw that the crazy lady was Mrs. Monroe, the black woman who lived in 2-East with an army of kids.

Jerry pushed through the crowd and walked right up. Mrs. Monroe was

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crying and trying to say something, but nothing sensible was coming out. One of the cops, a fat one with a red face, scowled at Jerry when he approached. "*Hey*," he barked.

"I live here," Jerry said. "What's going on?"

"It's none of your concern," said the beer-bellied cop. "Her kid run off, is all. Now get on by if you're going in. We'll handle her."

Jerry shrugged, looked curiously at the sobbing Mrs. Monroe, and went on through the front door. Like all the other six-flats on the block, his had a tiled entry hall, mailboxes and doorbells on the walls, a second door barring the way to the stairs. You needed a key or a buzz from upstairs to get past that one. Between the two doors, watching the scene on the steps, were a couple of his neighbors. The Gumbo Granny was in her rocker. She and the old wicker-chair with its faded flowered cushion came crawling out of 1-East every morning, and she sat there until dark, rocking and watching the street and rocking and smoking her pipe and rocking and holding incoherent conversations with whoever entered or left the building. Jerry nodded, but he knew better than to try to talk to her.

But the girl from 2-West was also standing there, and that was a different matter. She was a short, attractive blonde, about 25 or so. She'd only moved in about a month ago, with a couple of female roommates. He had the vague impression they were grad students at Northwestern, or something like that. The rest of them were pretty plain, but the blonde had a cute smile and a nice ass. She was standing casually by the door, wearing a white turtleneck sweater and a pair of tight jeans, listening to the argument outside. Jerry took out his key and hesitated. This seemed like a perfect opportunity to get to know her.

"Do you know what happened?" he asked her, nodding towards Mrs. Monroe and the cops.

She turned and brushed a strand of hair from her eyes. Her hair was very long and very straight and very blonde, just the way Jerry liked it. "One of her kids is missing," she said. "The oldest one, I think."

"Chollie," Jerry said. That was what everyone called him. He was a slight, well-mannered kid, always dribbling a basketball around the block, though Jerry had never seen him actually play the game. He was about sixteen, he thought; shy, maybe a little simple-minded. "Do they know what happened to him?"

"The police think it's just a runaway," she said. "That's what the fat one said, anyway. That was what set her off. They aren't very concerned. He hasn't been gone very long, I guess."

"How long is that?"

"She said she sent him out around eleven last Friday, to get some milk. No one has seen him since."

"Tough," said Jerry, shaking his

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head. "Chollie didn't strike me like the sort to run away. He was always so quiet. I hope nothing happened to him."

"Well, the police told her that no bodies of that description have turned up, anyway."

"Thank God for that much," Jerry said.

"Dey ain't gone to be no body," said the Gumbo Granny, rocking back and forth and sucking on her pipe.

"Excuse me?" the blonde said.

Jerry had to stifle a groan. It was always a mistake to speak to the Gumbo Granny. Once you acknowledged her, she got going, and once she got going she didn't stop. She was an old, *old* black woman, a tiny little monkey of a woman with dry, wrinkled brown skin and pink palms. She was nearly bald, and she had a pink spot around her left eye, a patch of pinkness in the middle of that wizened old face. It made her look a little bit like the dog Jerry remembered from the *Our Gang* comedies he'd watched as a kid, only with the colors switched around. She was half senile and didn't make sense most of the time, and even when she did, you couldn't always understand her, since she talked funny. Evidently she'd come up from New Orleans at some point, though she'd lived in the building as long as anyone could remember. It was on account of New Orleans that the younger people in the building started calling her the Gumbo Granny. There was no name on her mailbox, but then she never got any mail.

When the blonde spoke to her, the Gumbo Granny took the pipe out of her mouth and rocked slowly back and forth, nodding to herself. "He's gone, lawdy, lawdy. He's gone. I tells 'em and I tells 'em, but dey don't lissen." She shook her small head and rocked.

"Did you see something?" the blonde asked, frowning. "Do you know where the boy's gone?"

Jerry started to tell her not to pay any attention to the old woman, that she was crazy as a loon, but before he could, the Gumbo Granny was off again. "Yessum, I knows, I knows. I tells 'em, yessum. Won't get me out in dem streets at night, no, no, lawdy. Ain't findin' no body, no, no." She nodded to herself, her old tired eyes all wrinkled up and wise. "Dey got him, yessum, dey got ol' Chollie. I tells 'em, but dey don't lissen. Dey got him."

"Who?" said the blonde.

The Gumbo Granny peered around warily, as if to make sure there was no one lurking in the shadows beneath the stairs, and then she leaned forward in her rocker and whispered, "Dem needle mens got him." She nodded, satisfied, and settled back in her chair again, sucking on her pipe as she rocked and creaked, rocked and creaked. Outside, the police had finally stopped the flow of Mrs. Monroe's tears, and they were talking quietly now. The crowd of spectators on the sidewalk had begun to drift away in search of

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other, livelier diversions. It was clear that not much was going to come of this one.

"The needle men," said Jerry, curious despite himself. He'd probably regret asking, he thought, but he heard himself say, "Who are the needle men?"

The Gumbo Granny smiled conspiratorially. "We had'um down in New Orleans, yessuh, yessuh. Dey's tricky, dem needle mens, I knows all dey ways, you don't see me goin' out at night, nosuh, nosuh. Dey's hidin' out dere, awaitin', and dey got needles, dem big *looooong* kind long as you arm, and all sharp, with stuffs on 'em, yessuh, stuffs. Dey jump out at you, dey do, and poke you with dem needles, and you's done, lawdy, you's never seen again. Ain't findin' no body, not when dem needle mens gets you." She cackled.

The blonde from 2-West smiled. "A morbid thought," she said drily.

"Needle men," said Jerry. "She's crazy." The Gumbo Granny rocked away as if she never heard him. He and the blonde traded sympathetic smiles, the kind that say let's-indulge-the-pitiful-old-thing. "Why would these needle men stab Mrs. Monroe's boy?" the blonde asked. "Are they ghosts?"

"Lawdy, no. No, no, no. Don't you know nothin'?" The old woman rocked and clucked. "You's so young, don't know nothing' though, nothin'. I tells 'em, but they don't lissen. Dem needle mens no ha'nts. Dey's from Charity."

"Charity?"

"Hospital, yessum, yessum. Charity Hospital. It's bodies dey wants, bodies, fo' de students to cut up on, so dey creeps out with dem *looooooong* needles with de stuffs on de end, and dey stabs the black folks and drags 'em back. Nobody misses no po' black folks, nosuh. I seen 'em hidin' in de bushes, hidin' in de alleys, dem needle mens with dem needles, but dey ain't a-gettin' me. My daddy learned me, yessuh, and I knows 'em, yes I do. Chollie wouldn't lissen, but I tells 'em, I knows. Knowed 'em down in New Orleans when I was just a littlest girl, knowed how to spy 'em then. Knows 'em up here too, yes I do. Ain't gone get ol' me with dem needles, drag me off fo' dem practice doctuhs to cut up on." She rocked and smoked away. Outside, the fat policeman was questioning Mrs. Monroe and filling out a form.

"He'll come back, I bet," Jerry said, with a glance through the door. "Maybe there was fight or something, but Chollie was a good kid."

The blonde shrugged.

"My name is Jerry McCulloch, by the way," he said, smiling. "I'm a writer. Live in 3-West."

"Hi," she said, returning his smile. She was awfully pretty. He loved her hair. "I'm Kris. Kris Shelby."

"You're downstairs of us, right? With a couple of other girls?"

She nodded. "It's a long way from school, but the rent is low enough to

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make up for the el fares, and the apartment is bigger than anything we could have gotten near campus. Tuition is so high these days, you have to do all sorts of things to make ends meet." She wrinkled her nose. "Like living in this neighborhood, even."

Jerry nodded with sympathy.

"What do you write?" Kris asked. She had nice green eyes, he noticed. Very cool and alert.

"Anything they'll pay me for," he said with practiced modesty. "I sold a piece to the *Tribune* magazine once, on the abandoned coal tunnels beneath the Loop. There's a whole honeycomb of them, haven't been used for years. Maybe you read it?" Kris shook her head. "Well, it's not important. I do just odds and ends, really. Right now I'm working on a piece I'm hoping to sell to the *Reader*. Who knows?" He shrugged. "What about you?"

"What about me?" Kris said, lightly. She smiled.

Jerry stammered and restrained an urge to ask her about her hometown or her major. That was the kind of inane talk that always got him spurned down on Rush Street. He decided not to come on too strong. He looked at his watch. "Hey, I got to go," he said. "Glad we met. Now if it gets too loud upstairs, you'll know who to bitch at."

She nodded. "See you around," she said, turning her attention back to the street.

Jerry started up the stairs. At the first landing, he turned back and called down to her. "Hey, Kris." When she looked up, he said, "Watch out for them needle men!" She smiled and nodded, and Jerry was feeling very good as he bounded up the stairs to the third floor. Harold and his latest true love were in the living room, listening to the stereo and making out on the couch. Alan was watching some old movie on the tube in his room. "How was that restaurant?" he called out when Jerry passed.

"Not bad." Jerry leaned through the open door. "I met that blonde from downstairs. Kris."

"Nice," said Alan.

"Yeah," Jerry said, grinning. He went back to the kitchen to get himself a beer. The light in the fridge was burned out, and he hadn't bothered flicking on the overhead. So he found himself fumbling around in back. Finally he found a Bud.

He yanked off the tab there in the darkened kitchen and was just lifting the can to his lips when a car went past in the alley down below. All Jerry could see was the wash of its lights against the back of the buildings across the way, a dim, moving reflection.

That was when he finally remembered the guy with the needle.

He had a restless night. It was all so silly. The junkie in the leather-patched sports coat and the Gumbo Granny's needle men and Chollie Monroe had nothing to do with one another, that

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was obvious. Even so, it made Jerry feel strange. It *had* been Friday night, after all. He frowned and drank another Bud and went to bed.

He tossed and turned for more than an hour, his water bed sloshing softly underneath him every time he moved. Finally he drifted off to sleep. When he woke again, it was the middle of the night, and the apartment was dark and dead and quiet. A cool breeze was blowing in the open window, and the rippling curtains threw long shadows across his bed. Jerry stirred groggily and moved to shut the window a bit, and there he was, standing outside the window, a man in a sports coat with leather patches at the elbows. He had a dead white face, and he was smiling a terrible thin smile. As Jerry watched, his arm came through the open window. He was holding a long slender needle.

Jerry screamed and wrenched away, and all of a sudden he was tangled in his sheets on the floor, and Harold was standing in the doorway in his jockey shorts, saying, "Hey, you okay?"

"He's coming in the window," Jerry said breathlessly, from the floor.

Harold glanced at the open window, where the curtains twisted lazily in the breeze. "You moron," he said. "We're on the third floor."

Everybody had a big laugh about Jerry's nightmare the next morning, when they were all bumping into one another trying to make breakfast. Everybody but Jerry, that is. He just scowled at them and drank his coffee, and then he went off to the post office to check his box. You had to have a post office box in this neighborhood, the way mail was always getting ripped off.

He went down the front stairs, expecting that he'd have to listen to the Gumbo Granny spin more wild stories about deranged needle men. Fortunately she wasn't there; her rocker was in the entry way, but she wasn't in it. Jerry blessed his good fortune and went on by.

He was sitting in a booth at the coffee shop on Lawrence, sorting through his mail and waiting for a cheese omelet, when it suddenly hit him how odd that was. All the years he'd lived in that building, he'd never seen the Gumbo Granny's rocker without the Gumbo Granny. In the morning she brought it out with her. In the evening she took it in with her. In between they were always there, rocking. Always.

A kind of shiver went through him. "No," he said aloud.

"What do you mean *no?*" the waitress said. She was standing there with his cheese omelet in hand. "This is what you ordered, buster."

"Uh, yeah," said Jerry, abashed. "I didn't mean you."

The waitress looked at him strangely, set down his order, and walked off.

"No," Jerry repeated, picking up his fork.

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But that evening, when he returned to the apartment, the rocker was still there. Empty. Jerry ignored it.

The next day he came and went by the back stairs. He tried not to think about the rocker, the Gumbo Granny, needle men, or anything like that. He was down in the Loop all day, and after dark he went drinking for a couple of hours, but it was no use. He couldn't even concentrate on the women around him. He kept staring into his beer and seeing that empty rocker.

When he came up the alley near to midnight, he saw something even more chilling. Parked in the shadows across from his building was an old, battered black Javelin. Half drunk as he was, it startled him. He stopped in his tracks and stared at it. It was empty. Jerry looked around warily. Seeing no one, he approached the car. The trunk was locked.

He retreated upstairs and went to bed. "No," he said loudly to himself, in the privacy of his bedroom. But before he went to sleep, he closed and locked his window.

The following morning, he had to force himself to go out at all. He felt ridiculously nervous, with the rocker in front and the Javelin in back, but finally he laughed and said, "This is absurd," and went down the front way.

The Gumbo Granny's rocker was still in the entryway, still vacant. And now Jerry noticed something else as well. The old lady's pipe was lying on the tiles next to the rocker, in a smear of black ash.

He was standing there by the mailboxes, looking at it, when Kris came down. "Hi, Jerry," she said. "You're leaning against my mailbox."

He moved aside. "Uh," he said, as Kris got out her mail, "have you seen her lately? In the last couple days?"

"Who?" said Kris.

"Her. The old lady. The Gumbo Granny."

Kris looked at the rocker and wrinkled her nose. "No, I don't think so. Why?"

"She never leaves her rocker there like that. Never. She's always in it. But it's been there for three days now. I haven't seen her once in all that time."

Kris brushed back a fallen strand of hair and smiled mischievously. "Maybe the needle men got her," she said. She opened the inner door and started back upstairs, but when Jerry did not move, she looked back at him. "Jerry," she asked, "is anything wrong?"

"No," he said quickly. "No, nothing." If he told her half of the crazy stuff going through his head, he knew, he'd *never* get anywhere with her.

Kris shrugged and went upstairs.

The police made him hold for ten minutes and transferred him four times before he finally got connected with someone willing to talk to him. "I'm

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trying to get some information, officer," Jerry said. "I'm a reporter, and I need some figures on the number of disappearances from the Uptown area. Not killings, just cases where somebody vanished, with no body or anything, you understand?"

"What kind of time period you asking about? This week? This month? All year? You'll have to be more precise."

"Oh, hell, I don't know. This month, say. Can you get me the figures?"

"A lot of people vanish. Kids run off to New York or L.A. or God knows where, men skip out on alimony and child support, people duck collection agencies. We can't begin to keep track of 'em all, let alone find 'em. Not if they don't want to be found. What do you want this for, anyway?"

"It's a story I'm working on," Jerry said. "I'm a reporter."

"Yeah?" The voice sounded suspicious. "Who you with?"

"I'm kind of free-lancing."

"I see," the policeman said. "Well, you better come downtown and talk to someone else. You got to be accredited, you know. We don't give out information to every joker who calls up and says he's from the press."

"A kid vanished earlier this week. Charlie Monroe, Chollie they called him. Can you tell me if he's been found?"

"What business is it of yours? You family or something?"

Jerry didn't reply.

"Look, I can't help you. You better come downtown." Click.

Jerry hung up, frowning.

The rocker and pipe were gone the next morning, but somehow that failed to make Jerry feel any better. He knocked on the door of 1-East, a little warily, but still hoping that the Gumbo Granny herself would come scuffling to the door to tell him she'd been sick. He would have settled for a relative, telling him that she'd died. But there was no answer.

He spent the day at his typewriter, working on an assignment he'd pulled from the features editor of a neighborhood weekly, but he wasn't able to work up much enthusiasm about the gyros-pizza war for the stomachs of North Side singles. It was such a stupid story, anyway. Now if these damned needle men were only real, and he could prove it, expose them — *that* would be a story worth doing. Better even than his tunnels under the Loop. It could even get him a staff-writer job someplace. At the very least it was a certain sale.

Jerry pushed his typewriter away from him and sat thinking. The typewriter was an electric. It kept humming, like it was impatient, rushing him. He turned it off.

Then he found his notebook and took the el up to Evanston, to check out the library at Northwestern.

* * *

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That night Jerry returned in a fever. He'd filled twelve pages of his notebook in his close, careful script. He was so full with the story he felt he just *had* to talk to someone before he went nuts. But Alan was off somewhere, no telling when he'd be back, and Steve was still out of town. Harold was in his bedroom, but the door was closed, and when Jerry put his ear to it, he heard thumping and low moans. Harold wouldn't like being interrupted. Besides, he was still giving Jerry a hard time over that nightmare. No sense giving him more ammunition.

"Damn," he said. He glanced at his notebook again. Then he said, "What the hell," and went down to the second floor.

One of the roommates answered the door, a heavy, bovine sort with mousy brown hair and bad acne. "Kris is studying for a big test," she told him. "She won't want to be disturbed." She sniffed. "Her class standing is low enough as is."

"Never mind that," Jerry said, "I have to talk to her." He insisted until he was let into the apartment. The other roommate was in a corner of the darkened living room, studying under a tensor lamp. She looked up at him vaguely from behind coke-bottle glasses while the pudgy one went to fetch Kris.

"Hi," Kris said. "What's the matter?"

"I want to tell you something," he said. "Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

Across Sheridan was a small bar patronized by the Marine Drive crowd, about the only place in the immediate vicinity where you could drink without listening to country music or worrying about knife fights. A bouncer kept out the derelicts, the rednecks, and other undesirables. He gave Jerry a long glance, but finally passed them when Kris smiled at him. Jerry led her to a small table by the window, ordered a pitcher of dark beer and a couple of shrimp cocktails, and opened his notebook.

"They were *real*," he said in an excited whisper.

"Who?" Kris asked. "No, wait. I bet I know. The needle men."

Jerry nodded. "I was working all day, reading old books about life in New Orleans, folklore, looking over some newspaper microfilms. Nothing was ever proved about these needle men, but there were stories. For years and years, from the turn of the century or earlier well into the twenties. It was a black superstition, especially. If it was a superstition. They preyed on blacks, you see, because they were all so poor, and nobody much cared whether a few of them vanished or not. The police just laughed at the needle men stories, but the blacks passed the warnings along, word of mouth. It was just like the Gumbo Granny said. They were supposed to be medical students. They carried these long needles, tipped with poison or anesthetic, something like that, and they skulked

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around in alleys and parks and such. Just a scratch from one of those needles was supposed to be enough. The victim would go under in seconds, and other needle men would come and cart him off to Charity Hospital or the medical schools, wherever cadavers were needed for demonstration and dissection. Later on, a lot of blacks wouldn't go to movies, because the needle men liked to operate inside of theaters. They'd come and sit behind you, you see, and push their needles through the back of your seat. A little prick in the small of the back, that's all it would take. Then they'd carry you out like you were drunk or sick, and you'd never be seen again. No bodies to be found, of course."

Kris speared a tiny shrimp with her toothpick, dipped it in cocktail sauce, and nibbled at it delicately, a pinky stuck out. Her hair fell around her shoulders in a gorgeous honey-colored cascade, lit by dim reflections from the lights above the bar. But her green eyes regarded him skeptically, and for a moment Jerry thought he'd blown it for good with his talk of the needle men. She was going to laugh, or shrug him off as a crackpot, or ... he wasn't sure.

Instead she finished the shrimp, drank a bit of her beer, and said, "Well, it's an interesting story. Colorful. You can probably make an article out of it."

"Exactly what I'm going to do!" Jerry said.

"It'll have to be a kind of historical feature for some New Orleans magazine, though," she said. "You know, quaint old boogeymen."

"No, no," Jerry said. "You don't understand. That's just the background. I'm going to bring it all up to date, work in the modern stuff. Here and now. In Chicago."

Kris ate another shrimp and smiled. "That kind of story you might sell to the *Enquirer*, but nowhere else. Don't you think you're being silly?"

"No!" Jerry said stoutly.

"You really think these needle men exist? Not only in New Orleans around the turn of the century, but here and now, today, in Chicago? Is that what you think? And they carried off Chollie Monroe to provide some medical school with an experimental cadaver?" She shook her head, smiling. "You don't look like the sort of person to go off the deep end."

Jerry flushed. "It's not just Chollie," he insisted. "They got the Gumbo Granny, too. They had to. She knew all about them, you see. And there's more. Listen to me." He told her all about the guy with the hypodermic needle, and the black Javelin.

Kris listened to him politely enough, sipping her beer and nibbling on shrimp, but when he had finished, she did not look convinced. "A sports coat with leather patches, you say? I think I've seen him in the alley too. I know I've seen the car. But that doesn't mean anything. He probably lives in

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one of the other buildings around here. What's so mysterious about that? There's a white Mustang back there a lot too. It belongs to my roommate." She wrinkled her nose. "The hypodermic — well, maybe he is a junkie. Or a doctor. I don't know. Either one is more likely than being a needle-man, don't you think?"

"Even so," Jerry said, confused, "what about the Gumbo Granny?"

"Ah," said Kris, smiling, "that I happen to know about. I mentioned it to my roommate, Sheila, after I saw you by the mailboxes. The old lady had a stroke, Jerry. That's all. Just a stroke. The day after that fuss with the Monroe boy. She was out there in the morning, rocking, and she had her attack. Someone found her, called the hospital, the ambulance came and carted her away. Of course they wouldn't think to remove the rocker. So it stayed there, for days and days."

"It's gone now."

Kris smiled. "You know this neighborhood as well as I do. It finally got stolen, obviously. *You* put a perfectly good piece of furniture down there, and see how long it stays around."

Jerry sat back and shut his notebook. Suddenly he felt very confused. Kris was making a lot of sense, and his story was disintegrating around him. "What hospital is she in?" he asked.

"How should I know?" Kris said.

"Well," said Jerry. "Maybe you're right. I ought to check it out, though. This story could really make me." He brightened. "I know, I can call around to all the hospitals, until I find her."

"Asking for the Gumbo Granny?" Kris said. She smiled. "The staffs will love you. And won't you feel foolish when you find her?"

"Yes," Jerry admitted, ruefully. He tasted his beer. The head was gone, faded while they'd talked. "Still, it's worth doing. I mean, what if she *isn't* in a hospital? Then I'd be right, maybe." He scratched his head. "Your roommate saw an ambulance take the old lady away, right? They said she'd had a stroke?"

"Right."

"Well, what if one of these needle men came in, gave her an injection. She was too old to resist. She'd go under like *that*." He snapped his fingers. "And, then, what would be simpler than to pull right up with an ambulance and carry out the old lady in broad daylight. She had no relatives, like poor Chollie. Who could object? If the needle men are med students, the ambulance drivers are probably in with them, right? Certainly they could get an ambulance easy enough."

Kris laughed and shook her head. "Oh, come on. Listen to yourself, Jerry. You're kind of cute, and I thought you were bright, but you're talking like a real paranoid. The Gumbo Granny had nothing on you!" She leaned across the table and took his hand. "Listen to me," she said, giving him a small, affectionate squeeze. "All this theorizing is bad enough, but your

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whole motive is crazy. Contraband corpses for medical schools? Body snatching? Come *on*. That stuff might have been great in the days of Burke and Hare, maybe even in 19th-century New Orleans, but today? Are these needle men part of the faculties of the med schools, or do they just drive up, lift the bodies out of the trunks of their car, and dicker with the professors? I'm sure medical schools can get bodies in simpler ways, don't you think?"

Jerry grinned at her. "It so happens," he said, squeezing her hand back and delighted by the warmth of it, "that I thought of that. It puzzled me for a bit too, but finally I figured it all out. It will be in my article."

"Yes?" Kris said, patiently.

"Transplants," Jerry said proudly.

She raised an eyebrow.

"No, really," he said. "Think about it. The old needle men, they just wanted bodies, like the old lady said. For the teaching hospitals and med schools. They needed 'em for dissection and weren't choosy about how they got them. Today, of course, that demand isn't there, and there are channels and procedures and such. But still, the needle men are out there. *Why*, I asked myself. Why, for transplants. Just watch late-night TV sometime, you see all those public-service spots, donate your kidneys here, leave your eyes there. You go to get a driver's license, and they try to sign you up as an organ donor. Really, the demand is there. A lot of people need kidneys and livers and stuff, and there aren't enough to go around. You figure some rich people would be willing to pay almost anything to live, right? So there's got to be a black market in body parts, even if no one writes about it. The needle men. Only now they just put their victims to sleep instead of killing them, you see. The bodies get taken somewhere, still alive, and cut up for transplants. I bet there's money in it. A *lot* of money."

"And Uptown is full of these needle men?" Kris said.

"What better place? Today when I got off the el, a guy was lying passed out on the stairs. If some other guy had been helping him off, I never would have looked twice. We got so many runaways and such the police don't even count 'em. I know, I called them. There's gang wars, there's race trouble between the Orientals and the hillbillies and the blacks, there's fights in the bars most nights. Illegal aliens are working everywhere, nobody's got any records of them but their employers, and if one of them vanishes — well, he just got caught by immigration, or skipped town. Down in the all-black ghettos, maybe a white needle man would stand out, like they used to in New Orleans. But Uptown is so damn mixed that nobody stands out. Think about it. This is prime territory."

Kris let go of his hand and poured them both more beer. "Drink up," she said, "I've got to get back and study. I

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can see there is no dissuading you from this. You've got every crazy detail worked out, don't you?"

"It's not crazy," Jerry said. "At least I don't think it is."

"You can't prove a word of any of it, Jerry."

"Not now," Jerry said, "but I'll get proof, one way or the other. This story will make a real name for me; I'm not about to let it slip through my fingers. The needle men don't know I'm onto them. I'm going to start checking up on runaways and disappearances, that kind of thing. And I'm going to watch that damn Javelin real carefully. From my back stairs, I can see the whole alley. I'll buy binoculars. And a gun. Yes. I'd better start carrying a gun."

"You start wandering the alley with binoculars and a gun, and the police will be locking *you* up, not your needle men. Don't you think you're taking this folk tale a little too...." She stopped. "Oh my God," she said, looking out the window.

Jerry looked out too. Across the street was another tavern, a rough, noisy place Jerry had never dared enter. Two men had just come out of it. A white man in a corduroy jacket with leather patches on the elbows was helping a black youth into a waiting car. The black seemed to be drunk or unconscious. The car, Jerry noted, was a black Javelin.

"Oh, it's just coincidence," Kris said, but her voice sounded as if even she no longer believed it. She licked her lips. "He's just drunk. There are a thousand explanations."

"We'd better get back," Jerry said. "The needle men are out tonight." He paid the bill and ushered Kris out of there. In the alley, every shadow seemed to hold a smiling shape with a long, long needle, but they hurried past and up the back stairs, and nothing leaped out at them. Both of them were breathing hard when they reached Kris' landing. From the stairs, Jerry tried to tell himself.

He put his arm around her and bent to kiss her, hoping she'd permit it. Her enthusiasm took him by surprise. When they finally broke apart, Kris was studying him from those wide, green eyes. "Oh, damn you," she said. "It's silly, but now you've got me seeing needle men everywhere." She wrinkled her nose. "I hate to admit it, but I'm frightened."

Jerry stood dumfounded, not knowing what to say.

"I don't know how to ask this," Kris said. "Will you stay the night? With me? It'd make me sleep easier."

Jerry tried to keep from grinning. "Oh, sure," he said. "Me too."

"Thanks," Kris said. She turned and unlocked the door. Her apartment had the same layout as his own, but it was a lot neater. Better furnished, too. She and her roommates did a lot better than he. Kris didn't let him admire the decor, however. She led him straight to the bedroom, oddly enough the one right below his own.

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Books were strewn all over the bed. She gathered them up and set them on a nightstand, then turned and touched the light switch. A dimmer. Illumination went down to a soft glow, and Kris turned to him with a smile. "Naked fear makes me horny," she said. "What are you waiting for?"

"Uh," said Jerry. He grinned. "Sure." Then it was a race to get undressed, and they tumbled into bed together laughing.

Afterwards, Jerry felt better than he had for years; a girl like Kris, a story like the needle men. Things were really coming together for him. He said as much to her, as she nestled up against him and he stroked her soft, fine hair.

"Ummmm," she said, raising her head. "The needle men. Did you have to mention them again? I'd managed to forget about them for a few moments." She laughed. "It all seems silly now. Are you really going through with it?"

"Of course," he said, wounded.

She sighed. "Good luck," she said. She kissed his chest lightly, and her hand started doing interesting things lower down. "Can you stay the whole night, or will your roommates call the police? Maybe you should go up and tell them where you are. We don't want them thinking you've been carried off by the needle men." She giggled.

"They don't know anything about the needle men," Jerry said, "and they don't care where I spend my nights. We're not that close. You know how it is sometimes." He smiled. "I'll stay. Hell, I'll move in if you want me."

"I'll have to think about that one," Kris said. She sat up suddenly and climbed out of bed. "Excuse me," she said.

"Hey, where you going?" Jerry asked.

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"The little girl's room," she said. "Don't worry. I'll be back." She padded to the door, nude. Even in the vague, dim light, she was lovely. Her long hair moved behind her as she walked.

She was gone a long time. Jerry got restless. For a moment, he even felt afraid. He thought he heard a door open and close somewhere, and he had a sudden vision of the needle man, creeping up the back stairs with his long, sharp needle in hand, jimmying the lock, stealing down the hall, slowly, quietly. He could be out there right now, white-faced, grinning, needle poised and ready for Kris to emerge from the bathroom. Or maybe he'd already gotten her, maybe she was lying at his feet even now, and he was about to open the door and come in for Jerry too.

"God," Jerry said. He was giving himself the shivers. He shifted in bed, saw Kris' books stacked up on the nightstand, picked up one on impulse. It was hard to read anything in the dim light, but if it would take his mind off the needle men, it was worth the eyestrain.

He flipped through a few pages, frowned, flipped, stared. "Oh," he said, in a small whimper. "Oh, no. No."

That was when the door opened. They were standing there, all of them, Kris and her roommates, smiling. Kris had the needle. "You never asked me my major, Jerry," she said. "I'm in med school, second year. You'd be amazed at how expensive it is." She shrugged and came towards him.

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For all of you who have read about Gene Wolfe's tetralogy, Book of the New Sun, *here is a short and independent excerpt from the second volume,* The Claw of the Conciliator *(see F&SF Books, June 1981). The third book of the series,* Sword of Lictor, *will be published shortly by Timescape Books.*

The Tale of the Student and His Son

BY

GENE WOLFE

Part I

The Redoubt of the Magicians

Once, upon the margin of the unpastured sea, there stood a city of pale towers. In it dwelt the wise. Now that city had both law and curse. The law was this: That for all who dwelt there, life held but two paths; they might rise among the wise and walk clad with hoods of myriad colors, or they must leave the city and go into the friendless world.

Now one there was who had studied long all the magic known in the city, which was most of the magic known in the world. And he grew near the time at which he must choose his path. In high summer, when flowers with yellow and careless heads thrust even from the dark walls overlooking the sea, he went to one of the wise who had shaded his face with myriad colors for longer than most could remember, and for long had taught the student whose time was come. And he said to him: "How may I — even I who know nothing — have a place among the wise of the city? For I wish to study spells that are *not* sacred all my days and not go into the friendless world to dig and carry for bread."

Then the old man laughed and said, "Do you recall how, when you were hardly more than a boy, I taught you the art by which we flesh sons from dream stuff? How skillful you were in those days, surpassing all the others! Go now, and flesh such a son, and I will show it to the hooded ones, and you will be as we."

But the student said, "Another season. Let pass another season, and I will do everything you advise."

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Autumn came, and the sycamores of the city of pale towers, that were sheltered from the sea winds by its high wall, dropped leaves like the gold manufactured by their owners. And the wild salt geese streamed among the pale towers, and after them the ossifrage and the lammergeier. Then the old man sent again for him who had been his student, and said, "Now, surely, you must flesh for yourself a creation of dream as I have instructed you. For the others among the hooded ones grow impatient. Save for us, you are the eldest in the city, and it may be that if you do not act now they will turn you out by winter."

But the student answered: "I must study further, that I may achieve what I seek. Can you not for one season protect me?" And the old man who had taught him thought of the beauty of the trees that had for so many years delighted his eyes like the white limbs of women.

Spring came and with it gladness to all nature, but at spring the city was hung with black; and hatred, and the loathing of one's own powers — that eats like a worm at the heart — fell on the magicians. For the city had but one law and one curse, and though the law held sway all the year, the curse ruled the spring. In spring, the most beautiful maidens of the city, daughters of the magicians, were clothed in green; and while the soft winds of spring teased their golden hair, they walked unshod through the portal of the city, and down the narrow path that led to the quay, and boarded the black-sailed ship that waited them. And because of their golden hair, and their gowns of green faille, and because it seemed to the magicians that they were reaped like grain, they were called the Corn Maidens.

When the man who had long been the student of the old man but was yet unhooded heard the dirges and laments, and looking from his window saw the maidens filing by, he set aside all his books and began to draw such figures as no man had ever seen, and to write in many languages, as his master had taught him aforetime.

Part II
The Fleshing of the Hero

Day after day he labored. When the first light came at the window, his pen had been a drudge already many hours; and when the moon tangled her crooked back among the pale towers, his lamp shown bright. At first it seemed to him that all the skill his master had taught him of old had deserted him, for from the first light to the moonlight he was alone in his chambers save for the moth that fluttered sometimes to show the insignia of Death at his undaunted candle flame.

Then there crept into his dreams, when sometimes he nodded over the table, another; and he, knowing who that other was, welcomed him, though

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the dreams were fleeting and soon forgotten.

He labored on, and that which he strove to create gathered about him as smoke collects about the new fuel thrown upon a fire almost dead. At times (and particularly when he worked early or late, and when having at long last laid aside all the implements of his art, he stretched himself at length upon the narrow bed provided for those who had not yet earned the many-colored hood) he heard the step, always in another room, of the man he hoped to call into life.

In time these manifestations, originally rare, and, indeed, at first limited almost entirely to those nights when thunder rumbled among the pale towers, became common, and there were unmistakable signs of the other's presence: a book he had not unshelved in decades lying beside a chair; windows and doors that unlocked, as it seemed, of themselves; an ancient alfange, for years past an ornament hardly more deadly than a tromp l'oeil picture, found cleansed of its patina, gleaming and newly sharp.

One golden afternoon, when the wind played the innocent games of childhood with the fresh-fledged sycamores, there came a knock at the door of his study. Not daring to turn or express even the smallest part of what he felt by his voice, or even to desist from his work, he called: "Enter."

As doors open at midnight though no living thing stirs, the door began, a thread's width at a time, to swing back. Yet as it moved it seemed to gather strength, so that when it was open (as he judged by the sound) enough that a hand might have been thrust into the room, it seemed that the playful breeze had come in by the window to push life into its wooden heart. And when it was open, as he judged again, wider still, so much so that a diffident helot might have entered with a tray, it seemed a very sea storm seized it and flung it back against the wall. Then he heard strides behind him — quick and resolute — and a voice respectful and youthful, yet deep with a cleanly manhood, addressed him, saying: "Father, I little like to vex you when you are deep in your art. But my heart is sorely troubled and has been so these several days, and I beg you by the love you have for me to suffer my intrusion and cousel me in my difficulties."

Then the student dared turn himself where he sat, and he saw standing before him a youth haughty of port, wide of shoulder and mighty of thew. Command was in his firm mouth, knowing wit in his bright eyes, and courage in all his face. Upon his brow sat that crown that is invisible to every eye, but can be seen even by the blind; the crown beyond price that draws brave men to a paladin, and makes weak men brave. Then the student said, "My son, have no fear of disturbing me, now or ever, for there is nothing under Heaven that I should rather see than

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your face. What is it that troubles you?"

"Father," the young man said, "every night for many nights my sleep has been rent with the screams of women, and often I have seen, like a green serpent called by the notes of a pipe, a column of green slip down the cliff below our city to the quay. And sometimes it is vouchsafed me in my dream to go near, and then I see that all who walk in that column are fair women and that they weep and scream and stagger as they walk, so that I might think them a field of young grain beaten by a moaning wind. What is the meaning of this dream?"

"My son," said the student, "the time has come when I must tell you what I have concealed from you until now, fearing that in the rashness of your youth you might dare too much before the time was ripe. Know that this city is oppressed by an ogre, who each year demands of it its fairest daughters, even as you have seen in your dream."

At this the young man's eyes flashed, and he demanded: "Who is this ogre, and what form has he, and where does he dwell?"

"His name no man knows, for no man can approach near enough. His form is that of a naviscaput, which is to say that to men he appears a ship having upon its deck — which is in truth his shoulders — a single castle, which is his head, and in the castle a single eye. But his body swims in the deep waters with the skate and the shark, with arms longer than the most lofty masts and legs like pilings that reach even to the floor of the sea. His harbor is an isle to the west, where a channel with many a twist and bend, dividing and redividing, reaches far inland. It is on this isle, so my lore teaches me, that the Corn Maidens are made to dwell; and there he rides at anchor in the midst of them, turning his eye ever to left and right to watch them in their despair."

Part III
The Encounter with the Princess

Then the young man fared forth and gathered to him other young men of the city of the magicians to be his crew, and from those who wore the colored hoods he obtained a stout ship, and all that summer he and the young men he had gathered to him armored her, and mounted on her sides the mightiest artillery, and a hundred times practiced the making of sail, and the reefing of sail, and the firing of the guns, until she answered as a blooded mare does to the rein. For the pity they felt for the Corn Maidens, they christened her *Land of Virgins.*

At last, when the golden leaves fell from the sycamores (even as the gold manufactured by magicians falls at last from the hands of men), and the gray salt geese streamed among the pale towers of the city with the lammergeier

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and the ossifrage screaming after them, the youths set sail. Much befell them on the whale road to the isle of the ogre that has no place here; but at the end of those adventures the lookouts saw before them a country of tawny hills dotted with green; and even as they shaded their eyes to see it, the green grew greater, and greater still. Then the young man whom the student had fleshed from dreams knew that it was indeed the isle of the ogre and that the Corn Maidens were hastening to the shore for the sight of his sail.

Then were the great guns readied, and the flags of the city of the magicians, that are all of yellow and black, were hung in the rigging. Near they came and nearer, until fearing to run aground, they put about and beat along the coast. The Corn Maidens followed them, and following attracted more of their sisterhood until they covered all the land like grain indeed. But the young man did not forget what he had been told: that the ogre lived among the Corn Maidens.

After a half-day's sailing, they rounded a point and saw that the coast fell away as a deep channel that did not end, but wound its way among the low hills of the country until it was lost to sight. At the entrance to this channel stood a calotte of white marble surrounded by gardens, and here the young man ordered his companions to cast anchor, and went ashore.

He had no more than set foot on the soil of the isle than there came to meet him a woman of great beauty, swart of skin, black of hair, and luminous of eye. He bowed before her, saying: "Princess or Queen, I see that you are not of the Corn Maidens. Their robes are green; yours is sable. Yet were you to wear a dress of green, I should know you still, for your eyes sorrow not, and the light that is in them is not of Urth."

"You speak truly," the princess said. "For I am Noctua, the daughter of the Night and the daughter too of him whom you have come to slay."

"Then we cannot be friends, Noctua," said the young man. "But let us not be enemies." For though he did not know why, being of the stuff of dreams, he was drawn to her; and she, whose eyes held starlight, to him.

At this the princess spread her hands and declared: "Know that my father took my mother by force and here holds me against my wishes where I would soon go mad were it not that she comes to me at each day's end. If you do not see sorrow in my eyes, it is only because it lies upon my heart. That I may be free, I shall willingly counsel you how you may engage my father and triumph."

All the young men of the city of the magicians grew quiet and gathered to listen to her.

"First you must understand that the waterways of this isle turn and turn again, in such a way that they can never be charted. You can by no means use sail as you wander them,

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but must kindle your furnaces ere you go farther."

"I have no fear of that," said the young man fleshed from dream. "Half a forest was laid waste to fill our bins, and those great wheels you see shall walk these waters with the tread of giants."

At that the princess trembled and said, "Oh, speak not of giants, for you know not what you say. Many ships have come as you have, until the oozy bottoms of all these measureless channels are white with skulls. For it is the custom of my father to allow them to wander among the islets and straits until their fuel is spent — however much it may be — and then, coming upon them by night when he can see them by the glow of their dying fires and they not see him, slay them."

Then the heart of the young man fleshed from dreams was troubled, and he said, "We will seek him as we are sworn, but is there no way in which we may escape the fate of those others?"

At this the princess took pity on him, for all who have the stuff of dreams about them seem fair in some degree at least to the daughters of Night, and he fairest of all. Thus she said, "To find my father before your last stick is burnt, you need only search out the darkest water, for wherever he passes his great body raises a foul mud, and by observing it you may discover him. But each day you must begin the search at dawn, and at noon desist; for otherwise you may come upon him by twilight, and it will go evilly with you."

"For this counsel I would have given my life," said the young man, and all his companions who had come ashore with him raised a cheer. "For now we will surely overcome the ogre."

At this the solemn face of the princess became more sober yet, and she said, "No, not surely, for he is a dread antagonist in any sea fight. But I know a stratagem that may aid you. You have said that you came well supplied. Have you tar to pay your ship, should she leak?"

"Many barrels, " said the young man.

"Then when you fight, see that the wind blows from yourself to him. And when the fight is hottest — which will not be long after you have joined — have your men cast tar into your furnaces. I cannot promise that it will give you the victory, but it will aid you greatly."

At this all the young men thanked her most extravagantly, and the Corn Maidens, who had stood shyly by while the young man fleshed from dreams and the daughter of Night spoke, raised such a cheer as maidens raise, a cheer not strong, but filled with joy.

Then the young men made ready to depart, kindling the fires in the great furnaces amidships until the white specter was born that drives good ships ahead no matter what wind may blow. And the princess watched them from

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the strand and gave them her blessing.

But just as the great wheels began to turn, so slowly at first that they appeared scarcely to move, she called the young man fleshed from dreams to the railing, saying: "It may be that you shall find my father. Should you find him, it may be that you shall defeat him, laying low even such prowess as his. Yet even so, you may be sorely vexed to find your way to the sea once more, for the channels of this isle are most wondrously wrought. Yet there is a way. From my father's right hand you must flay the tip of the first finger. There you will see a thousand tangled lines. Be not discouraged, but study it closely; for it is the map he followed in webbing the waterways, that he himself might always have it by him."

Part IV
The Battle with the Ogre

Inland they turned their bow, and even as the princess had foretold, the channel they followed soon divided, and divided again, until there were a thousand forking channels and ten thousand islets. When the shadow of the mainmast was no larger than that, the young man fleshed from dreams gave orders that the anchors be cast and the fires banked, and there, for a long afternoon, they waited, oiling the guns and readying the powder and preparing all that might be needful in the hardest fought battle.

At length Night came, and they saw her striding from islet to islet with her bats about her shoulders and her dire wolves dogging her steps. No more than an easy carronade shot from their anchorage she seemed, yet they all observed that she passed not before Hesperus or even Sirius, but they before her. For a moment only she turned her face toward them, and none could be certain what her look conveyed. But all of them wondered if indeed the ogre had taken her without her will as her daughter had said; and if so, if she had not lost the resentment she might be imagined to have felt.

With the first light, the trumpet sounded from the quarterdeck and the banked fires were fed new fuel; but as the dawn breeze stood fair for the channel they held, the young man ordered all plain sail set before the great wheels were ready to take their first step. And when the white specter wakened, the ship pressed forward at double speed.

For many leagues that channel ran, not straight, but near enough that there was no need to furl the sails or even put about. A hundred others crossed it, and at each they studied the water; but each was translucent as crystal. To tell the strange sights they beheld on the islets they passed would require a dozen tales as long as this — women stem-grown like flowers overhung the ship, and in kissing them sought to smear their faces with the powder from their cheeks; men to whom wine had

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brought death long before lay by springs of wine and drank still, too stupefied to know their lives were past; beasts that would be omens to future times, with twisted limbs and fur of colors never seen, waited the nearer approach of battles, earthquakes, and the murders of kings.

At last the youth who stood first mate to the young man fleshed from dreams approached him where he waited near the steersman, saying: "Far we have traveled on this channel already, and the sun, that had not shown his face when we bent our sails, approaches his zenith. Following it, we have crossed a thousand others, and none has shone a trace of the ogre. May it not be that it is an unlucky course we take? Would not it be wiser to turn aside soon and try another?"

Then the young man answered: "Even now we pass a channel to starboard. Look down, and tell me if its waters are more soiled than our own."

The youth did as he was bid, and said, "Nay, clearer."

"Soon now, another opens to port. To what depth can you see?"

The youth waited until the ship stood opposite the channel of which the young man spoke, and then he answered: "To the utmost. I see the wreck of a ship of long time past, many a fathom down."

"And can you see so far in this channel we sail now?"

Then the youth looked at the waters they cleaved, and they were become as ink, and the very splatters that flew from the laboring wheels might have been rooks and ravens. At once understanding came to him, and he shouted to all the others to stand by the guns, for he could not tell them to make ready, who had made ready so long before.

Ahead lay an islet higher than most, crowned with tall and somber trees; and here the channel bent gently, so that the wind, that had been dead astern, was at the quarter. The steersman shifted his grip on the wheel, and the watch payed out certain sheets and tightened others, and the ship's prow came around the quick curve of the cliff, and there before them lay a long hull of narrow beam, with a single castle of iron amidships and a single gun larger than any they carried thrusting from its one embrasure.

Then the young man fleshed from dreams opened his lips to shout to the bow-chaser crews that they should fire. Before the words could be spoken, the great gun of their enemy roared, and its sound was not as thunder or as any other sound familiar to the ears of men; but rather it seemed that they had stood in a tall tower of stone, and it had fallen all around them in a moment.

And the ball of that shot struck the breech of the first gun of their starboard battery and, striking it, broke it to pieces and shattered itself as well, so that the fragments of the breaking of both scattered through the ship like

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dark leaves before a great wind, and many died thereby.

Then the steersman, waiting no order, swung the ship about until her port battery bore, and the guns fired each by the will of the man that pointed it, as wolves howl at the moon. And their shots flew about the single castle of the enemy to either side, and some struck it so that it tolled knells for those who had perished a moment before, and some struck the water before the hull that bore it, and some struck the deck (which was of iron also) and at that contact fled shrieking into the sky.

Then the single gun of their enemy spoke again.

And so it continued, in moments that seemed whole years of time. At last the young man bethought him of the advice of the princess, the daughter of Night; but though the wind blew strong, it was hardly more than astern of his ship; and if he were to shift until it blew from him to his enemy (as the princess had counseled), for many moments no gun would bear but the bow chasers; and then when a battery might be brought to bear, it would be the starboard, of which one gun was destroyed and so many men dead.

But it came to him in that moment that they fought as a hundred others had fought and that these hundred others were all dead, their ships sunk and their bones scattered among the myriad channels that whorled and tangled the face of the isle of the ogre. Then he gave his order to the steersman; but none answered, for he was dead, and the wheel he had held, held him. So seeing, the young man fleshed from dreams took the spokes in his own hands and presented to their enemy the ship's narrow bow. Then it was seen how the three sisters favor the bold, for the next shot from their enemy, that might have raked her from stem to stern, went to port by the length of an oar. And the next, to starboard by the width of a boat.

Now their enemy, who had stood fast before, neither seeking to fly nor to close, swung about. Seeing that he would escape them if he could, the crew raised a great shout as though already they had won the victory. But marvelous to see, the single castle, which all had until then believed fixed, swung about the other way, so that its great gun, that was greater than any of their own, still bore.

A moment later and its ball had struck them amidships, dashing a gun of the starboard battery from its truck as a drunken man might fling an infant from its cradle and sending it skittering across the deck and smashing everything in its path. Then the guns of the battery — those that remained — spoke all in a chorus of fire and iron. And because the distance was now less than half what it had been (or perhaps only because their enemy, having shown fear, had weakened the fabric of his being), their shot no longer

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struck his castle with an empty clanging, but with a cracking as though the bell that will toll the end of the world were breaking; and ragged flaws sprang to life on the oiled blackness of the iron.

Then the young man shouted into the gosport to those who had remained faithfully in the engine room feeding the furnaces with tree-wrack, telling them to cast tar into the flames as the princess had counseled them. At first he feared that all there were dead, then that the order was not understood in the din of battle. But a shadow fell upon the sun-brightened water that stretched between their enemy and himself, and he looked upward.

In ancient times, so it is said, a tattered child, the daughter of a fisherman, found on the sand a stoppered flask and by breaking the seal and drawing forth the cork became queen from ice to ice. Just so, it seemed, an elemental being, strong with the strength of the forging of creation, debouched from the tall smokestacks of their ship, tumbling over himself in dark joy and growing with a rush, as the wind comes.

And the wind came indeed, and it seized him with its uncounted hands and bore him as a solid mass down upon their enemy. Even when nothing more could be seen — neither the long, dark hull with its deck of iron nor the single gun whose mouth had spoken words to doom them — they wasted no moment, but fell to their guns and fired into the blackness. And from time to time they heard the gun of their enemy also firing, but no flash did they see, and where those shots struck they could not say.

It may be they have struck nothing yet and still circle round the world seeking their target.

They fired until the barrels shone like ingots newly come from the crucible. Then the smoke that had poured forth so long diminished, and those below shouted by the gosport that all the tar was consumed, and the young man fleshed from dreams ordered that fireing cease, and the men who had worked the guns fell upon the deck like so many corpses, too exhausted even to beg water.

The black cloud melted. Not as fog melts in the sun, but as an army strong to evil dissolves before repeated charges, giving here, stubbornly standing there, still mustering a wisp of skirmishers when it seems all has given way.

In vain then they searched the new-polished waves for their enemy. Nothing could they see: not his hull nor his castle, nor his gun, nor any plank or spar.

Slowly, so cautiously it might have been thought they feared an unseen foe, they advanced to the very spot where he had lain at anchor, noting the shattered trees and furrowed ground of the islet beyond, where their shot had spent its energies. When they were over the point at which that long iron

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hull had lain, the young man fleshed from dreams ordered the great wheels reversed and at last halted, so that they rested as quietly as their opponent had. Then he strode to the rail and looked down, but with such an expression that no one, not even the most brave, dared to look with him.

When he lifted his eyes at last, his face was set and grim, and with no word to any man he took himself to his cabin and barred the door. Then the youth that was second to him ordered the ship put about, that they might return to the white calotte of the princess; and he ordered also that wounds be bandaged, and pumps set in motion, and such repairs as could be made begun. But the dead he kept with them, that they might be buried on the high sea.

Part V

The Death of the Student

It may be that the channel was not so straight as they believed. Or that they had lost their bearings in the fight, without being aware thereof. Or that the channels twisted (as some alleged) like worms in a litch, when no eye was upon them. Whatever the truth might be, all day they steamed — for the wnd had died away — and by the last light saw only that they cruised among islets unknown.

All night they lay to. When morning came, the youth called to him such others as he felt might offer the most valuable counsel; but none of them could suggest anything save calling upon the young man fleshed from dreams (which they were loath to do) or pressing onward until they reached open waters or the calotte of the princess.

That they did all day, striving to hold a straight course, but winding against their will among the many turnings of the channels. And when night came again, their position was no better than before.

But on the morning of the third day, the young man fleshed from dreams came out of his cabin and began to walk up and down the decks as he was wont to do, examining such repairs as they had made to their damage and asking those wounded who by the pain of their wounds were awake early how they fared. Then the youth and those who had advised him came to him, and they explained all that they had done and asked how they might find the sea again, that they might bury the dead and return to their homes in the city of the magicians.

At this he looked up into the very vault of the firmament. And some thought he prayed, and some that he sought to restrain the anger he felt against them, and some only that he hoped to gain inspiration there. But so long did he stare that they waxed afraid, even as they had when he had peered into the water, and one or two began to creep away. Then he said to them: "Behold! Do you not see the sea birds? From every corner of the sky they stream. Follow them."

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Until morning was nearly done, they followed the birds in so far as the winding channels permitted. And at last they saw them wheeling and diving at the water ahead, so their white wings and ebon heads seemed a cloud low hung in their course, a cloud fair without but thunderous within. Then the young man fleshed from dreams told them to load a carronade with powder only and to fire it; and at the crash of the gun all those sea birds rose mewing and crying. And where they had been, the crew saw a great piece of carrion floating, which seemed to have been a beast of the land, for it had, as they thought, a head and legs four. But it was greater than many elephants.

When they were near, the young man ordered the boat put into the water, and when he climbed aboard they saw that he had thrust into his belt a great alfange whose blade caught the sun. For a time he labored over the carrion, and when he returned he carried a chart, the largest any of them had seen, drawn upon untanned hide.

By dark they reached the calotte of the princess. All waited on board while her mother visited her; but when that terrible woman was gone, all who could walk went ashore, and the Corn Maidens crowded about them a hundred to each youth, and the young man fleshed from dreams took the daughter of Night into his arms and led them all in dances. None of them ever forgot that night.

The dew found them beneath the trees of the princess's garden, half smothered in flowers. For a time they slept so, but when afternoon threw backward the shadows of their masts, they were awake. Then the princess bade farewell to the isle and swore that though she might visit every country over which her mother strode, she never would return there; and the Corn Maidens swore likewise. Too many of them there were, perhaps, for the ship to hold; yet it held them, so that all the decks were green with their gowns and gold with their hair. Many adventures they had in making their way back to the city of the magicians. This tale might tell how they cast their dead into the sea with prayers, yet afterward saw them in the rigging by night; or how certain of the Corn Maidens wed those princes who, having spent years so long enchanted that they are loath to leave that life (and have in that time learnt much of gramary) build palaces on lily pads and are seldom seen by men.

But all those things have no place here. Be it sufficient to say that as they neared the cliff at whose top stands the city of the magicians, the student who had fleshed the young man from dreams stood on the battlements, watching for them over the sea. And when he beheld their dark sails, smutted by the burning tar that had blinded their enemy, he believed them blackened in mourning for the young man, and he threw himself down, and so perished. For no man lives long when his dreams are dead.

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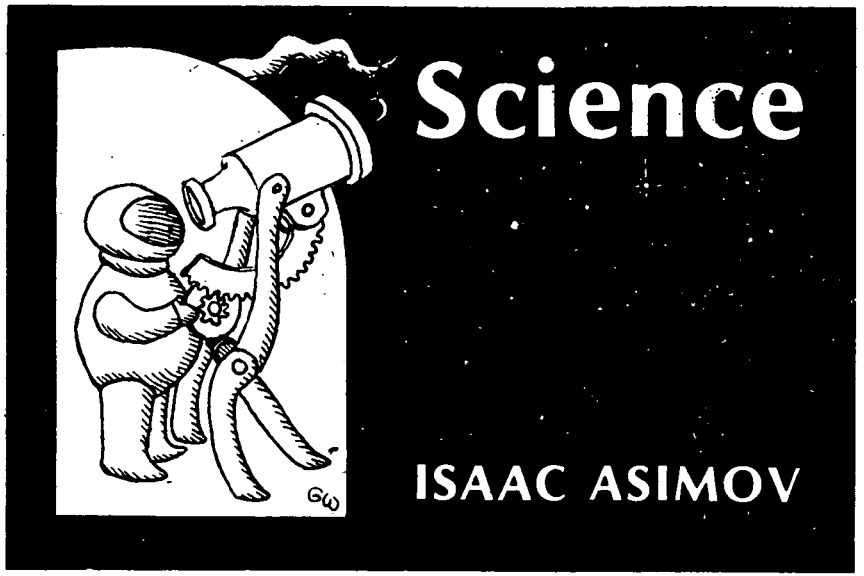

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

LET ME COUNT THE DAYS

I am currently working on a revision of *Asimov's Biographic Encyclopedia of Science and Technology*. When I first published the book in 1964, it contained the short biographies of about a thousand scientists (including a few inventors and explorers) arranged in chronological order of birth. In the second edition, published in 1972, I revised and lengthened many of the biographies and increased the number to 1,195. In the third edition, which I hope will be out in 1982, there was again a revision and lengthening of many of the biographies and a further extension to the number of 1,510.

For each biography I begin by giving the place and the date of birth and death (to the exact town and day, when I can find it) and in doing so have come across a peculiar fact. During my work on the first edition, I couldn't help but notice that a large majority of the famous scientists of all ages with whom I dealt had lived long lives and had died at ages well beyond my own. Somehow that is no longer the case. I can't explain it, but in the third edition, a surprisingly large fraction of the scientists I deal with have died prematurely at ages *less* than my own.

This got me to thinking about the age at death of my scientists, and

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for a while I toyed with the idea of adding that age to the initial statistics.

I decided against it, for it seemed to me that it might be a touch ghoulish to do so. Besides, given the impossible calendrical system that humanity has worked out, it would take me a short period of time to calculate the exact age. Not much time for any one entry, but multiply that by at least a thousand where the exact birthdate and deathdate are known, and it would come to a substantial investment of time and one that I was reluctant to make.

For instance, the longest-lived scientist in the book is Michel Eugene Chevreul, a French chemist who was born in Angers on August 31, 1786 and who died in Paris on April 9, 1889, so that when he was a child he could watch aristrocrats on the way to the guillotine during the Reign of Terror and when he was an old, old man he could watch the Eiffel Tower under construction.

How old was he when he died? Well, if you simply subtract the year of birth from the year of death, you get 1889 - 1786 = 103. However, he was born in August and died in April, so he was a bit short of his 103rd birthday when he passed away. To be exact, he was 102 years, 7 months, and 10 days old when his life was done. To be still more exact, and allowing for the varying lengths of months and the precise intervention of leap-years, Chevreul died on the 37,476th day of his life. (We can ignore the matter of hours, minutes and seconds, since my statistical information is never that precise.)

Here's the way that is calculated. From August 31, 1786 to August 31, 1888 we have 102 years which, allowing 365 days per year, comes to 37,230 days. There is a Leap Day every four years, the first in Chevreul's life coming on February 29, 1788 and the last on February 29, 1888. By the Gregorian calendar, however, there was one interruption in the every-fourth-year cycle, since 1800 was *not* a Leap Year. Omitting 1800, that means there were 25 Leap Days in the course of Chevreul's life, and these must be added to the number of his days and that brings us to 37,255. The period from August 31, 1888 to April 9, 1889, the actual day of Chevreul's death (allowing 30 days for September and November, 31 days for October, December, January and March, 28 days for February, and 9 days for the fragment of April) gives us an additional 221 days which brings us, as aforesaid, to a total of 37,476 days.

As you see, this sort of thing would grow tedious indeed if I tried to work it out for every person in my book for whom I had the exact birthdate and deathdate.

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If, instead of counting days, months and years as three separate but interconnected systems, people had merely counted the days, then the task would have been much simpler. A single subtraction per person would at once give the exact age of death. Still ghoulish, you understand, but it would then have been an irresistible task for anyone with my own overwhelming compulsion to count things.

As it happens, though, astronomers *do* count the days. They do so according to a system invented in 1583 by a man named Joseph Justus Scaliger. I mentioned this fact in a footnote to THE WEEK EXCUSE (F & SF), June 1972) and now is the occasion to go into it more deeply.

Scaliger was a French scholar who was born in a small French town named Agen on August 5, 1540 and died in Leiden, Netherlands on January 21, 1609, on the 25,005th day of his life, so that he had a lifetime almost exactly 2/3 as long as that of Chevreul.

Scaliger was inhumanly driven by a scholarly father into an encyclopedic knowledge of the classical authors. The treatment was not as cruel as it might have been, for the young Scaliger took to his tasks with extreme avidity and apparently loved to pile up knowledge of all kinds.

He was converted to Protestantism in 1562 when France was badly divided between the Catholics and the Protestant "Huguenots." The two parties were engaged in a long-drawn-out series of civil wars in which the Huguenots, rather surprisingly, held their own despite the fact that they made up only ten percent of the population.

The low point for the Huguenots came on August 23, 1572 (the day of the year which was dedicated to St. Bartholomew in the Church calendar). The Catholic party took advantage of a truce to attack the unprepared Huguenots and to kill some tens of thousands of them in cold blood. Scaliger, either by a fortunate chance or keen foresight, left Paris just before this "St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre" and went to the Protestant stronghold of Geneva, Switzerland, and so he survived. In 1593, he took a professorial position with the University of Leiden (again a Protestant center) and remained there till his death.

He died in humiliation, however. Scaliger's father had always maintained that he was connected by birth to the old ruling family of the city of Verona in Italy, and young Scaliger believed that implicitly. He proudly spread the news every chance he had, and in all controversies he used his own noble blood as a bludgeon against his contemptible low-born opponents.

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Toward the end of his life, however, evidence surfaced which made it perfectly clear that the elder Scaliger had lied. Scaliger's enemies jeered and Scaliger wilted and died.

Scaliger was particularly interested in chronology. He considered not only Greek and Roman history, but studied every scrap of record he could find on the various barbarian nations. He considered not only the Biblical record of the Jews but everything that existed concerning the histories of Egypt, Assyria, Chaldea, Persia and so on.

Naturally, every land had its own system of keeping track of time, and Scaliger managed to trace out no less than 50 different calendars. He did his level best to match them, one against the other, so that he could convert the time when an event took place according to one calendar into what the time would have been by any other of the calendars he studied and, particularly, what it would have been in the calendar that was being used in western Europe at the time.

In this way, he could produce the outline of a world history in which all events everywhere could be put into one well-defined order. One would know just what was happening in Greece when something else was happening in Persia; or what was happening in Carthage or in Gaul when something was happening in Rome and so on.

In point of fact, Scaliger is considered the founder of modern chronological studies.

Scaliger saw that it was a wearisome task to deal with calendars in general, even the best of them, because all were beset with the notions of days and weeks and months and seasons and years in an unending mish-mash. The only way to cut completely through all calendrical confusion was simply to count the days. The day was common to all calendars, and it was unthinkable that there could be a culture anywhere that would not consider the day a natural unit of time. The overwhelming fact of sunrise and sunset could not possibly be ignored (except in the polar regions, of course, but no calendrical system reached Scaliger from the thin leaven of Eskimos who inhabited the shores of the Arctic Ocean).

Scaliger therefore set about numbering the days according to what he called the "Julian period." It is usually thought that he was in this way honoring his slave-driving, birth-bragging father, Julius Caesar Scaliger. It may also be, however, that he named it for the Julian Year, which was fundamental to his calculations, and which was named for another Julius Caesar — *the* Julius Caesar, in fact.

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* * *

It may seem that it is a simple task to number the days. You just go 1, 2, 3, 4 and so on as long as the days hold out. You will never run out of numbers.

The question is, though, which is Day 1?

You might let *today*, the day on which you think of doing the numbers, be Day 1. Then tomorrow is Day 2, and so on.

Perhaps it would be more impressive, however, to think up a particular date in the past, some date on which something of great significance to you or to your culture had taken place, and let that be Day 1. You might pick your birthdate as Day 1, or you might (if you are an American) decide to make July 4, 1776, the birthdate of the nation, Day 1.

Scaliger might have chosen his own birthdate, or, perhaps October 31, 1517. That was the day on which Martin Luther nailed his list of 95 theses on which he was ready to dispute to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral — thus beginning the Protestant movement. Or he might have picked the birthdate of Jesus as Day 1.

Scaliger, however, was a chronologist, and he wanted a Day 1 that had calendrical significance. For instance, it had to be on some January 1, so that Day 1 would begin a year. But which year?

Well, there were two kinds of years that were used in classical times. There was the solar year based on the movements of the Sun in the sky, and that was 365 days long. It was invented by the Egyptians, and a slightly improved version of it was introduced into Rome by Julius Caesar in 45 B.C. It was called the Julian Year in his honor.

In the Julian Year, the year is taken to be 365.25 days long so that four years are exactly 1461 days long. In order to make each year contain a whole number of days, you arrange to have three years of 365 days each and then a fourth year of 366 days; this pattern repeating itself with metronome-like regularity.

The advantage of the solar year is that it keeps time with the seasons so that planting time, harvest time, wet and dry, winter and summer, come at the same region of the calendar year after year.

There is also a lunar year based on the phases of the Moon. This was invented by the Sumerians and was inherited by the later peoples of Babylonia. It spread to the Jews and Greeks, and it still forms the basis of the Jewish religious calendar. It is also used by the Christian world, even today, to calculate the day of Easter.

In the lunar calendar, there are 12 lunar months (the time from new

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Moon to new Moon) in the year. A lunar month is about 29.5 days long (29.53059 to be exact) so that lunar months can be made alternately 29 and 30 days long. However, 12 lunar months come to 354.367 days, which is about 11 days short of the length of the solar year. This means the lunar calendar will quickly get out of phase with the seasons unless that 11-day discrepancy is made up.

If you were to add the 11 days each year, you would throw the year out of synchronization with the phases of the Moon, which would go against religious tradition. In those societies with a lunar calendar, people therefore waited till the shortage amounted to about a whole lunar month and then added it. This meant that every third year or so there would have to be a year with 13 lunar months.

Somewhere about 500 B.C. it struck Babylonian astronomers that a period of 19 solar years was just equal to a period of 235 lunar months (235.003, to be exact, but let's not quibble). With 235 lunar months, one could have 12 lunar years of 12 months each and 7 lunar years of 13 months each. A cycle of 19 years was set up with the 13-month years spread more or less evenly among them — making up the 3rd, 6th, 8th, 11th, 14th, 17th and 19th years, actually. At the end of the cycle the lunar calendar would be exactly even with the Sun, and a new cycle could begin.

In other words, if January 1 of a certain year is blessed with a new Moon (so that it would be the start of the year in both the lunar calendar *and* solar calendar), so would the January 1 that was 19 years earlier, and 19 years earlier than that and so on indefinitely.

It seemed to Scaliger that Day 1 ought to be on a January 1 with a new Moon so it could start both years.

As it happened, January 1, 1577 fell on the new Moon. If we count back 83 lunar cycles of 19 years each, we count back 83 X 19, or 1,577 years. This brings us back to the year 1577 — 1577, or 0. But there is no year 0. The year before A.D. 1 is 1 B.C. Therefore, it turns out that January 1, 1 B.C. was on the day of the new Moon.

Scaliger may have had the impulse to make that Day 1, for it was his belief that Jesus was born on December 25, 1 B.C. and it must have seemed significant that January 1 of the year of Jesus's birth began both a solar year and a lunar year. (Actually, Jesus couldn't have been born in 1 B.C. because, according to the circumstantial account in Matthew, Herod the Great was alive at the time of the birth of Jesus, and Herod died in 4 B.C. Jesus must have been born at least one or two years earlier than that — but no one really knows.)

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Scaliger resisted the impulse to make January 1, 1 B.C. into Day 1, however. To have chosen any particular date that is embedded in history as Day 1 would have created unnecessary difficulties.

For instance, by a convention made official only in the time of Charlemagne, a misplaced piety has counted the years from the birth of Jesus. This means that we have a double system of counting — forward from A.D. 1 and backward from 1 B.C. with no year 0 in between (because Europeans knew nothing about the zero symbol in Charlemagne's time). This introduces needless confusion and complication in chronological studies.

Indeed many unsophisticated people find the whole notion of "B.C." too complicated to consider and wipe it out. I suspect that millions in the United States have a vague feeling that history started less than two thousand years ago. The common saying "ever since the year 1" makes it seem as though time began with A.D. 1.

Before the introduction of this "Christian Era," many people used a "Mundane Era" of one variety of another, by which the years were counted from the time of the Biblical creation of the world. There was no general agreement, however, on exactly when the world was created since the Bible has no chronological system, from beginning to end, that anyone can make indisputable sense of.

Nevertheless, the date generally accepted by Protestant Fundamentalists today is 4004 B.C.

If we were to consider January 1, 4004 B.C. as Day 1, that would be rather convenient, for it would eliminate any need for negatively-numbered days. Though the Earth existed for billions of years before 4004 B.C. (something no one dreamed of in Scaliger's time), written history did not. All the events of historical times for which one could reasonably try to find an exact date have taken place after 4004 B.C. and would therefore have fallen on a positively-numbered day.

Scaliger, however, did *not* choose January 1, 4004 B.C. as his Day 1 because, for one thing, that date was worked out by the Anglican bishop, James Ussher, in 1650, which was 41 years after Scaliger's death. Nevertheless, all the mundane eras in use placed the creation of the world some time before 3500 B.C., and Scaliger was chronologer enough to know he needed a date at least that early for his Day 1.

To find some significant early date, Scaliger considered the solar cycle. This has nothing to do with the Sun as an astronomical body. It deals, in-

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stead, with the day of the week on which January 1 of a particular year falls. The arrangement is neatest when January 1 falls on a Sunday so that it begins the week as well as the year. In Latin, Sunday is "dies Solis" and that is why it is referred to as the "solar cycle."

Since most years are 365 days long, they are 52 weeks and 1 day long. That extra day means that if January 1 is on a Sunday in a given year, it falls on a Monday the next year, on a Tuesday the one after and so on. If all years were 365 days long, January 1 would fall on a Sunday every 7 years.

In the Julian calendar, however, every fourth year is 366 days long, or 52 weeks and 2 days. If January 1 of a 366-day year falls on a Sunday, the January 1 of the next year is on a Tuesday. It "leaps over" Monday, so that a 366-day year is called "Leap Year."

Suppose, then, we number the days of the week from Sunday to Saturday, 1 through 7, and imagine January 1 of a Leap Year falling on Sunday (1). The next year January 1 will fall on Tuesday (3), then the next year on Wednesday (4), then Thursday (5), then Friday (6). But this year is another Leap Year so that January 1 on the year after skips over Saturday (7) and is on Sunday again (1).

In fact, the progression goes like this if we place an asterisk to mark the Leap Years: 1*, 3, 4, 5, 6*, 1, 2, 3, 4*, 6, 7, 1, 2*, 4, 5, 6, 7*, 2, 3, 4, 5*, 7, 1, 2, 3*, 5, 6, 7, 1*.

If you count, you will see that 28 years after a January 1 of a Leap Year that falls on a Sunday, there will be another Leap Year in which January 1 will fall on a Sunday, and everything will then repeat over and over. (We don't really have to count. There are 7 days in a week and 4 years to a Leap Year, and 7 and 4 are mutually prime — there is no number other than 1 that will divide both 7 and 4 exactly — so that the length of the cycle is 7 X 4, or 28.)

As it happens, 1560 was a Leap Year (all years with numbers which are divisible by 4 are Leap Years in the Julian calendar — at least in the A.D. part of it). If we count backward in 28-year intervals then 56 such solar cycles takes us back to 9 B.C. the nearest such year to the birth of Jesus. (The year 9 B.C. is a Leap Year even though 9 is not evenly divisible by 4, because there is no Year 0. In the B.C. portion of the calendar, Leap Years have numbers which, when divided by 4, leave a remainder of 1. I'm sorry about that but that's what comes of leaving out Year 0.)

Had 1 B.C. (a Leap Year, by the way) had January 1 on a Sunday, so that January 1 began not only the lunar year and the solar year, but the week also, Scaliger might not have been able to resist calling it Day 1. For-

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tunately, it fell on a Wednesday and Scaliger had to look further.

Are there years in which the solar cycle and the lunar cycle coincide and where January 1 begins the week, the lunar year and the solar year; in other words in which January 1 of a Leap Year falls on a Sunday with a new Moon in the sky?

Certainly! Since the solar cycle is 28 years long and the lunar cycle is 19 years long and 28 and 19 are mutually prime, the combined cycle is 28 X 19, or 532 years long. In other words, if January 1 of a certain Leap Year falls on a Sunday with a new Moon, then 532 years earlier there was another such January 1 and so on. This 532-year cycle was first pointed out by Victorian of Aquitaine about A.D. 465.

The year 1140 was a Leap Year in which January 1 fell on a Sunday with a new Moon, so this was also true for January 1, 608, for January 1, 76, for January 1, 457 B.C. and so on.

One of those dates, if one counted back long enough, would be suitable for Day 1, but which one? Scaliger didn't want to choose arbitrarily. He needed additional significance. He therefore took into account the period of the indiction.

The indiction is the year in which, by Roman law, a census was taken of property and individuals in order to set up some system of taxation. The Emperor Diocletian, about A.D. 300, decreed that the indiction should take place every 15 years and the custom survived the fall of the Empire and right into Scaliger's time.

The period of the indiction had no astronomical significance at all — it was entirely man-made — but Scaliger may have picked it because its length, 15 years, introduced a number that was mutually prime with the 532 years of the combined solar-and-lunar cycle. The factors of 15 are 3 X 5, and those of 532 are 2 X 2 X 7 X 19, so that no particular factor appears in both. That means that the combined solar-lunar-indiction cycle, or "Julian cycle" is 532 X 15, or 7,980 years long.

Scaliger counted far back to find a Leap Year that was also an indiction year and in which January 1 fell on a Sunday with a new Moon. That year turned out to be 4713 B.C.

That year was long, long before there was any indiction, or any Roman Empire, or any Julian calendar — but that didn't matter. Scaliger had what he wanted and he allowed January 1, 4713 B.C. to be his Day 1. This manner of counting gives each day thereafter its own "Julian Day."

Scaliger published his investigation of chronology, including his introduction of the system of Julian Days, in 1583, and, as luck would have

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it, the very basis on which he founded the system, the Julian Year, came to the beginning of its end the year before.

In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII formally recognized that the year was not 365.25 days long but 365.2422 days long and decreed that ten days which had been wrongly accumulated over a period of over a thousand years through the use of a slightly over-long year, be dropped. As a result the day after October 4, 1582 was October 15 and not October 5.

To keep further accumulation from taking place, three Leap Years were to be dropped every four centuries. In other words, instead of having every single century year (1600, 1700, 1800 etc.) a Leap Year, only those century years divisible by 400 would be Leap Years. That is, 1600 and 2000 would be Leap Years, but 1700, 1800 and 1900 would not be.

Protestants did not at once recognize this new "Gregorian calendar" since it was promulgated by a Pope, but little by little, they fell into line. Nowadays, the Gregorian calendar is global. All nations use it for international dealings, if nothing else.

Thus, the Julian cycle of 7,980 years is 2,914,695 days long so that Julian Day, 2,914,696 would fall on January 1, 3268 and perhaps start a new count. By the Gregorian calendar, however, Julian Day 2,914,696 will fall on January 23, 3268 and the neat balance will be upset.

That doesn't matter, however. Whatever the course of thought that led Scaliger to choose January 1, 4713 B.C., it was an adequate choice and once chosen all the scaffolding of this period or that cycle can be torn away and discarded. It is only necessary to keep counting the days from January 1, 4713 B.C. without any regard to calendar rules and calendar reforms.

What's more, the Julian Day is in actual use; it is not just the peculiar quirk of a nutty chronologer. Astronomers use it routinely and find it a great convenience. They start the Julian Day at noon (to leave the night — when observations are made — unbroken by a Day-change) and assign each day its number.

Thus, Halley's Comet reached its perihelion on a certain Julian Day in 1835 and on another in 1910, and by merely subtracting the former from the latter, it can be seen that the period of Halley's comet was 27,183 days. Other cyclical manifestations, such as the periods of variable stars, can also be dealt with simply and profitably.

Converting a particular calendar day into a Julian Day, or vice versa, using either a Julian calendar or a Gregorian calendar (or, in principle, any calendar with fixed and rational rules) can be carried through according to straightforward system of calculations which are, to be sure, very tedious.

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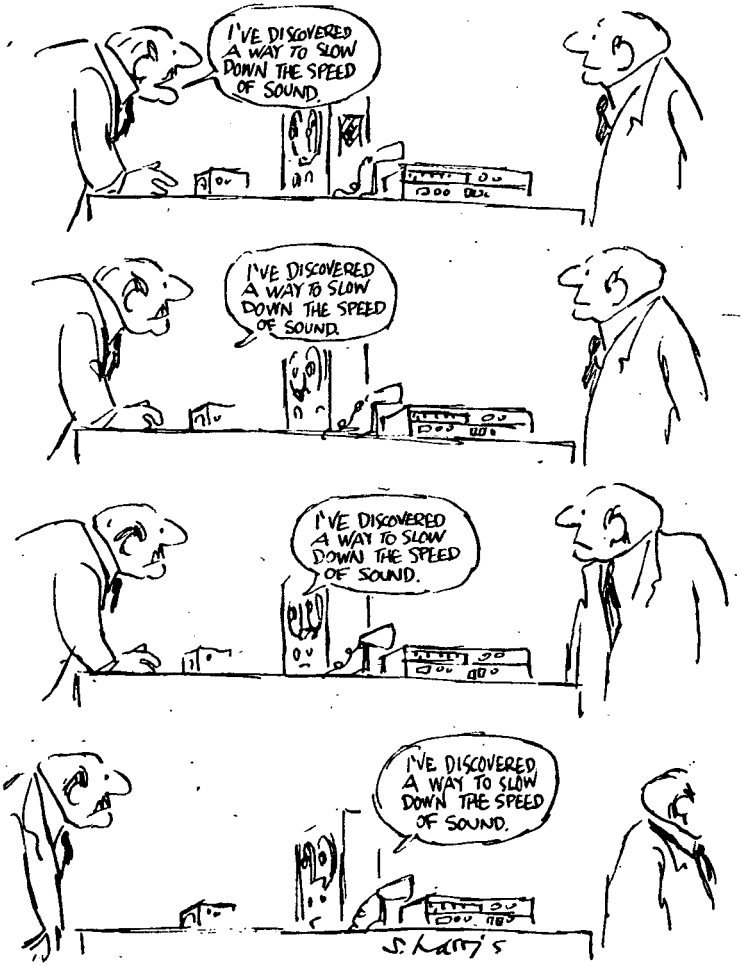
These days, however, it is only necessary to program a computer and it will grind out Julian Days for any calendar day you wish in a twinkling.

As it happens, at noon on January 1, 1982, Julian Day 2,444,971 will start. Knowing that (if you have nothing better to do) you can work out the Julian Day of your birthdate and of the day on which you read this and at once know how many days you have lived. I'd do it for myself, but I don't think I want to know just how many days I've lived at this particular moment.


I'VE DISCOVERED A WAY TO SLOW DOWN THE SPEED OF SOUND.
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S. Harris

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Here is a welcome new story from one of F&SF's most varied and accomplished contributors. Richard Cowper's novels TIME OUT OF MIND and PROFUNDIS were recently published in new paperback editions by Pocket Books.

Incident at Huacaloc

BY
RICHARD COWPER

The moment the girl stepped out onto the hotel terrace she caught sight of the man standing in the splash of shade cast by the largest of the lasiandra trees which lined the road down to the village. He could have been any age between forty and sixty. Such of his hair as was visible beneath his white peaked cap was flecked with silver, and there were two deep lines like scars running from the sides of his bony nose to the corners of his thin-lipped mouth. The lids hooding his dark eyes seemed as ancient and as weary as a lizard's.

With a conscious effort the girl forced herself to look away. Raising her right hand to shade her eyes, she stared up pointedly to where the dry, sun-warmed air drawn in from the desert had already begun to coax away the last remnants of overnight mist from the clefts and gullies on the mountainside. But all the time she remained uneasily aware of the man's eyes resting upon her like a faint but compelling physical pressure.

A long-distance excursion coach came droning up the steep white road towards the hotel. It pulled up with a hiss of its air brakes and proceeded to execute a three-point turn. As it compleated its maneuver a party of international tourists who had been mustering in the hotel lobby were shepherded out through the swing doors by a courier. They swarmed down the steps and clambered aboard the coach. The door purred shut, the engine throbbed, and the bus pulled out into the road and rolled away down the hill trailing an azure banner of exhaust smoke.

A young man emerged from the hotel, walked across to the girl and said, "We've missed the falls trip, Vee."

"I know," she said. "I was just

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watching them go."

"Were Bob and Lillian there?"

"I didn't see them."

"Maybe they've gone off somewhere with that German couple."

"Yes, maybe," she said, and the way she said it made it clear that the topic was of little interest to her.

With a slightly self-conscious air the young man took a newish-looking tobacco pipe from the pocket of his linen jacket, tapped the bowl against the heel of his shoe, then blew down the stem. His name was Michael Clarke. He was twenty-five years old and a qualified electrical engineer. For the past eighteen months he had been working for an international construction company on a hydroelectric project in Ecuador. Just ten days ago he had stood in front of the British Consul in Guayaquil, taken this girl by the hand, and claimed her as his lawfully wedded wife. He was still feeling somewhat dazed by his own audacity and his good fortune.

He removed the pipe from his mouth and gestured down the tree-covered slopes toward the distant lake. "Do you fancy a boat trip out to the island? They go every hour."

The girl turned her head and surveyed the prospect but said nothing.

"Well, we'd better decide on *something.*"

"I wish..." she began and then settled for a faint, vague sigh.

"What do you wish?"

"I don't know, Mike. I just feel like doing something — well, something *different*, that's all."

"Such as?"

"I don't know."

In his demanding new role of husband and man of decision Michael now felt it incumbent upon him to act decisively. "We'll walk down to the village," he said, laying his hand upon her arm. "According to that timetable in Reception, there's a local bus up to Chiluto at ten-thirty."

She allowed him to steer her down the steps. As they approached the road, the man left his station beneath the tree and moved towards them. *"Ingleses?"*

Virginia stared at him and then nodded.

He dipped a brown hand into an inside pocket, took out a sheaf of folders, selected one and presented it to her. "You come, lady. We go," he said.

Michael shook his head and showed his teeth in a tight smile. "No, thanks," he said firmly. *"No. Gracias."*

The man ignored him. *"Seis,"* he said, holding up six fingers before Virginia. *"Solo seis. Cuatro ya esperan.* You come. We go."

"Come on, Vee," whispered Michael. "You'll only encourage him, for Christ's sake!"

"Wait," she said. "He's got a dirty, Mike. Look!" She held the illustrated folder open before him. Reluctantly he read: *"Aerial Treasure Tour. Discover the Hidden Mysteries of the Sun Cult. Fly by Airship to Visit the Secret Shrines*

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of the Inca. The Adventure of a lifetime."

"Cuanto es?" she enquired hesitantly.

For answer the man reclaimed the folder, turned it over and pointed to where a printed figure of 1500 pesos had been crossed out and the number 1000 scribbled in ballpoint beside it.

"Mil?" she said. *"Mil pesos?"*

"Si, señora. Mil pesos."

"But, Mike, that's even less than the falls trip."

"You're forgetting there's a meal and wine thrown in with that."

"Comida, si," said the man, nodding his head emphatically and flashing his white teeth in a dazzling smile.

"You mean there's a meal too?" she asked. *"Comida esta incluido?"*

Si, señora. Comida y chicha." He winked and raised his hand to his lips in a drinking mime. "You come. We go." He tapped his wristwatch. *"Pronto, hey?"*

Michael shrugged, publicly disclaiming all responsibility for whatever disasters might ensue, while at the same time contriving to suggest that he was quite certain they were inevitable. Yet, even as he did so, he could not help feeling a glow of connubial pride in Virginia's impulsiveness.

He watched her nibbling at her lower lip. By all the standards of feminine beauty prevailing in 1992, she was certainly not beautiful — her mouth was too wide for that, and her nose definitely too snub — but there was something about her, some inner quality of wildness, that he found profoundly attractive.

She took one last glance at the folder and then nodded. "Let's go, Mike," she said. "It sounds fun."

The ship — a J.P.8 — was moored in a gulley about a quarter of a mile up the hill behind the hotel. Decorated in alternate stripes of silver and gold with a huge roguish eye picked out in blue and black at either side of her prow, she looked like some sort of improbable cross between an overweight diva and a rather indolent tropical fish. The name inscribed along her flanks in black letters three feet high was *Sun Bird.*

Their guide led the way to the flimsy alloy ladder which descended from the open door of the streamlined fiberglass pod and indicated to them that they should enter. Virginia went first. As she gained the doorway and ducked inside, there came a cheerful squeal of welcome: "Vee! Welcome aboard the Golden Chicken, love! I thought you were booked for the falls trip."

"Hello, Lillian! Hi, Bob! We changed our minds at the last minute."

"Me too. I talked Bob into this. Have you met Miss Phillips and Miss Price — Margery and Phyllis? Margery, this is Virginia Clarke — she's on her honeymoon. Here comes the lucky fellow now. Vee and Mike sit at our table."

Virginia shook hands with the two

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elderly ladies whom she had seen once or twice before entering or leaving the hotel dining room. Having written them off as two retired school teachers on a package holiday, she was mildly surprised to find them on board the *Sun Bird*.

While Michael was being introduced in his turn, Virginia glanced around the cabin. The furnishings were adequate but hardly luxurious. A foam upholstered bench seat ran down either side of the gondola, and long plexiglass windows afforded excellent all-round visibility. The pilot's seat, controls and instrument panel were not divided off in any way from the passenger accommodation.

The guide climbed aboard, hauled up the ladder behind him, made the door fast and clipped the folded ladder into place behind it. He glanced round at his passengers, nodded, then touched himself on the chest and announced: "Manuelo. *Capitano*. Welcome aboard *Sun Bird*. We go!" Without further ado he walked the five or six paces to the pilot's padded chair and sat down with his back to them.

Miss Phillips delved into a capacious canvas hold-all and produced a Nikkono unispeaker. Holding the microphone close to her lips, she said, slowly and clearly, "Will we have an opportunity to purchase souvenirs?" Then she pressed the translator button and held the instrument out towards the captain. Nothing happened.

He glanced round at her, pulled an apologetic face, and returned his attention to his controls.

"That really is too bad," said Miss Phillips, shaking the machine fretfully. "It was working perfectly half an hour ago. And I put in a new battery on purpose only this morning."

There was a sudden hiss of compressed air from somewhere beneath their feet and Bob Masters said, "Hey up! There goes the ballast. We're off!"

The hissing stopped. Gazing out of the window, Virginia saw that the scrub-covered walls of the gulley were sliding away beneath them. A moment later the roof of the hotel swam into sight, its two-dozen international flags which proclaimed its status and star rating scarcely fluttering, so faint was the breeze.

When they had risen some five hundred feet, captain Manuelo started the engine. The *Sun Bird* tilted her stubby beak and with monumental grace began to slip through the tatters of melting mist, heading inland over the lettuce-green algarroba forests towards the snow-capped peaks of the Maritime Cordillera.

They had been airborne for an hour when Manuelo flipped a switch on the console before him and a female voice addressed them from a concealed loudspeaker: "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Our first port of call is to be the ancient Inca city of El Atras, which lies at an altitude of seven thou-

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sand feet above sea level. El Atras was abandoned by the Incas in the year 1534 when its population fell victim to the plague of measles brought into Peru by the Conquistadores. Until the year 1924 the memory of the city survived only in the legends of the Quechua peoples. In that year the site was rediscovered by a Portuguese mineral prospector. Unlike Machu Picchu and similar cities in the Central Cordilleras, El Atras has never become a regular place of tourist pilgrimage because it is almost impossible to reach by road. Translated from the Quechua tongue, the name of this city is 'Dwelling of the Mists,' and their legends state that it was to El Atras that the spirits of all the Quechua warriors who had died bravely in battle were summoned before they were permitted to journey on to the Court of Inti, the God of the Sun. We will spend one half-hour in El Atras before we travel on to the Quechua village of Huacaloc where lunch will be provided. Thank you."

Manuelo flicked up the recorder switch with one hand and with the other eased forward the control column. The *Sun Bird* nosed downward obediently between the glimmering, cloud-wreathed peaks of the sierra, heading towards a small circular lake whose enclosed waters were fed by the snow streams which could be seen dangling down the sheer mountainsides like so many silver threads. In the center of this lake was a small rocky island and perched upon the island was all that remained of the city of El Atras.

"What was that name?" demanded Miss Phillips, frowning over the pages of her guide book.

"El Atras, I think," said Miss Price.

"That's right," said Bob. "It's here in the brochure. E-L-A-T-R-A-S."

"Well, it's not *here*," said Miss Phillips. "What was that phrase for 'What is the name of this place?' Phyllis?"

"*Como se Llama* wasn't it?"

Miss Phillips shifted along the seat towards Manuelo and coughed for attention. *Perdone, Capitano.*"

Manuelo glanced round and jerked his head interrogatively.

Miss Phillips repeated her phrase, gesturing ahead to where the ruined walls of the city gleamed like bleached bones in the morning sunlight.

"*El Atras, señora.*"

"Ah," said Miss Phillips, nodding her head. "That's what I thought."

Bob caught Michael's eye and winked. Bob Masters was a retired insurance salesman who prided himself upon a dry sense of humor and an inexhaustible fund of common sense. Like his father before him he was convinced that all women were chicken-brained, and he was sure that his own wife was the biggest fool of the lot. Strangely enough, the fact that Lillian had won them both a round-the-world holiday for two as the first prize in a competition sponsored by a detergent company had served only to confirm him in his belief. Of the couple, both

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Michael and Virginia preferred Mrs. Masters, who was open-minded, sympathetic, and unfailingly good-natured. Her chief drawback was that she had a laugh like the scream of a lovesick peahen.

Manuelo brought the dirigible down almost to water level and then ghosted in towards a stone jetty. Half a dozen lethargic Indians in brightly colored ponchos appeared from nowhere and assisted the mooring. Manuelo left his seat, opened the door and lowered the ladder. He raised his left wrist and tapped his watch with his finger. "Thirty minute, hey?" he said.

"OK, Capitano," said Bob. "Message received and understood."

The visitors descended to the paved surface of the jetty and looked about them. The air was cool but not cold. Sunlight striking up from the water sent lacy ripples of reflection flittering restlessly across the crumbling, weed-tufted walls.

Michael and Virginia left the others and began climbing up to the roofless temple from which the purged souls of long-dead warriors had once winged their way to heaven. The thin air made them pant like long-distance runners. Having reached the top, they took photographs of each other and examined the altar stone. Michael vaulted up onto it and was preparing to stretch himself out and fit his head into the skull-shaped declivity when Virginia cried out, "No, don't do it, Mike!"

"What's up?"

"I don't know. I just don't think you should, that's all."

"Afraid I might catch the measles?"

"Come on. Let's go down now."

"Hey, look here," he said pointing to a herring-bone pattern of incised channels in the polished limestone. "I bet that's how they drained off the blood. Down through those two holes. Look, Vee!"

Virginia shuddered violently and cradled her neck protectively in her arms. "This place gives me the creeps," she muttered. "I'm going."

Michael laughed, swung his legs off the altar and leapt to the ground. "You never told me you were superstitious."

"I'm not. I just feel a bit cold, that's all."

"Really? Take my jacket."

She shook her head and ran away from him, skipping down the long flight of weed-fissured steps toward the distant jetty. Halfway down she encountered Miss Price and Miss Phillips on their way up. She paused in her headlong flight and shook her head at them. "I shouldn't bother," she panted. "It's not worth the effort."

"Oh, but we always make a point of climbing right to the top," said Miss Price, blinking at her amiably through thick-lensed spectacles. "It's sort of a fetish of ours." Her glance shifted and her expression changed to mild concern. "Oh, have you hurt your neck, my dear?"

"My neck?" Virginia touched her throat with her fingertips, withdrew

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them, and found to her utter astonishment that they were smeared with red. "I must have scratched myself somehow," she said. "How on earth did that happen?"

"What's up, Vee?"

"I seem to have scratched my neck," she said, turning to Michael. "Lend me your hanky, Mike."

"How did you manage that?"

"I don't know. On my bracelet maybe." She licked the handkerchief which he handed to her and dabbed at a spot below her left ear. "OK?" she asked.

Michael peered at the place she indicated. "Whereabouts is it?"

"There." She tilted her head to one side and pointed.

"Are you sure?"

"Well, of course I'm sure." She held up her fingertips, which but a moment before she had seen bright with her own blood, and found no trace of it at all. She gazed at them incredulously, then turned her head and stared back up the steps to where Miss Price and Miss Phililps were again plodding their way doggedly up towards the temple. She opened her mouth as if about to call out to them and then, instead, handed the handkerchief back without a word.

"What I quite fail to understand," said Miss Phillips, "is why there is no reference to El Atras in our guide book. I shall certainly feel justified in writing a letter of complaint to the Tourist Office. After all, there are pages and pages on Tiahuanaco and Machu Picchu."

"Maybe they don't know about it," suggested Bob Masters with a deadpan expression. "Or maybe they're keeping it a secret. Don't forget this is supposed to be a mystery tour."

Already the island citadel and the lake had vanished far beneath them. Having risen through the high tissue of cloud, the *Sun Bird* was now slipping between the cold, indifferent peaks at a steady sixty miles an hour.

Miss Phillips rose to Bob's facetious suggestion like a trout to a well-cast fly. "But of course they must know about it," she said testily. "What I suspect is that it's been indexed under its native name for reasons of patriotism. These people are very proud of their pre-Conquest heritage. And quite rightly. The Inca civilization was a fantastic achievement. A genuinely benevolent communal despotism. In most respects it was far superior to the Aztec because it succeeded in integrating the cultures it absorbed."

"But didn't they have human sacrifices, Margery?" Lillian's enquiry was seasoned with a delicate blend of fascination and horror.

"Well, so did we," retorted Miss Phillips. "We called ours martyrs. In any case among the Inca it was considered a rare and highly esteemed privilege to be chosen as a sacrificial victim. It was tantamount to entering heaven through the front door."

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"I bet the victims didn't see it that way," said Bob, and winked across at Michael.

"Ah, but they *did*," said Miss Phillips triumphantly. "It was deemed essential that the chosen spirits appeared before the Sun God happy and contented."

"And how did they work that one?"

"I believe they partook of some sort of drug," said Miss Phillips. "*Vilca* I think it was called."

"*Wilca?*" said Virginia.

Miss Phillips turned to her with a surprised smile. "Yes, you are quite right, my dear. The *V* is pronounced as a *W* in Quechua. So *Wilka* would be more correct. No doubt it was some sort of strong narcotic."

Virginia frowned. "I'm sure I've heard the word before, somewhere. I can't imagine where."

Manuelo chose that moment to switch on the recorded commentary. "We are now approaching Huacaloc," the disembodied voice informed them. "*Huaca* is the Inca word signifying a shrine or holy place, and it is from Huacaloc that those of you who wish to do so will be taken on a visit to the shrine of Illapa, the all-powerful thunder god of the Incas. Those among you who are already familiar with the site at Ingenio will, I am sure, connect the name of Illapa with the colossal lines and figures carved out on the rocks of the Nazca plateau. The shrine at Huacaloc is believed to have had some special relationship with those mysterious designs. But before you undertake this trip, you will be invited to partake of a feast in the traditional Quechua style. Here, ritual dances will be performed for your entertainment and you will be offered a choice of a number of native dishes, among them *Charqui*. You will also have an opportunity to purchase examples of many of the beautiful and interesting native handicrafts, such as ceramics and the weaved fabrics, for which the Quechua peoples have long been famous. You will stay in Huacaloc for three hours. We wish you all a happy time. Thank you."

"Isn't that splendid, Margery?" chirped Miss Price. "The ponchos are bound to be cheaper up here than down by the coast." She turned to Michael confidentially. "My niece Betty asked me to bring her a poncho home for her birthday, but the ones we saw in Trujillo were *so* expensive."

Michael nodded and smiled. "Are you a good haggler?"

"Oh, quite hopeless," she confessed. "I usually leave it to Margery. She's so much better at it than I am."

"Look! That must be it!" cried Lillian, pointing ahead. As though some careless giant had just dropped a handful of sugar cubes, a cluster of whitewashed adobe dwellings had come into view, perched precariously on the terraced slope of an extinct volcano.

Virginia pressed her nose to the window and peered out. Far below her a river wriggled like a vein of twinkling

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silver through the dense forest. A thousand feet above the rim of the crater three condors were floating against a backdrop of blue sky and slowly drifting clouds.

"Huacaloc," announced Manuelo. "We go down."

They watched the long shadow of the *Sun Bird* slide across the sunlit mountainside and over the pale-green plantations of ripening maize. Brilliant dots of color that were the ponchos of children gathered into little groups and then began scampering excitedly back towards the village. A small herd of grazing llamas trotted first this way and then that as if uncertain whether or not to panic.

Manuelo brought the *Sun Bird* round in a slow circuit of the crater before approaching the village from the far side. At once it became clear that Huacaloc was a good deal larger than it had at first appeared. The main part of the settlement was concealed from the southern approach by a ridge and a deep cleft in the mountainside down which a stream tumbled to join the river thousands of feet below. This chasm was bridged in two places and the bridges formed the link between the two halves of the village. Brightly berried trees were clinging to the steep sides of the ravine. Just as at El Atras, natives were already on hand to assist with the mooring of the ship. Manuelo left his seat, opened the door and lowered the ladder. *"Espere un momento."* he said and disappeared.

Michael peered out of the doorway and was surprised to see that quite a crowd of villagers had already assembled. To one of these — an old man with thin white hair — Manuelo was talking rapidly in what was presumably the local dialect.

A minute later he reappeared at the foot of the ladder. "Come. Please." he said. "You follow me. Yes?"

Clutching their cameras and handbags, the six visitors descended the flimsy ladder and stepped out of the airship's shadow into the bright Andean sunshine. The Indians moved back and formed themselves into a sort of guard of honor on both sides of the narrow path, bowing their heads gravely.

"Nice little turnout," remarked Bob. "What's the Spanish for 'Pleased to meet you'?"

"Try *mucho gusto, señoras,*" suggested Michael with a grin.

"Well, *mucho gusto* to you *señores,*" said Bob, ducking his head to left and right.

The impassive villagers bowed back, and the little group made its way up the path in the wake of Manuelo and the old man. As they passed between the silent ranks, the natives formed themselves into a rearguard and shuffled along the path after them.

Miss Phillips unslung her unispeaker from her shoulder and demanded of it: "Does anyone here speak English?" She held it out towards the group who were following and pressed the transla-

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tion button. A green light bead winked on and a voice within the machine enunciated clearly: *"Hay alquien que hable ingles?"*

The Indians regarded her blankly.

"Well, at least it's working again, dear," said Miss Price.

"I simply can't believe they don't understand Spanish," said Miss Phillips. "*Everybody* in Peru speaks it."

"Haven't you got a Quechua program there?" Bob asked with a grin.

"There's no such thing," said Miss Phillips. "I suppose I could try Portuguese."

"Why don't you have a go at el Capitano," he suggested. "He speaks the lingo."

"I have no faith in interpreters," said Miss Phillips. "They have a way of twisting what you say to suit themselves."

Five minutes later the party entered the village square. In fact, due to the nature of the mountainside out of which it had been excavated, it was more of an irregular lozenge than a genuine square, and it sloped so steeply that the lower stories of the houses on the northern side were almost on a level with the upper stories of those on the south. Dominating the higher group was a substantial building which looked as though it might once have been a church. The carved wooden double doors were standing open. Inside the building native women in somber-colored dresses could be seen moving back and forth.

Manuelo and the old man halted before the wide white steps. As soon as the little group caught up with them, Manuelo pointed to the doorway and announced: *"La posada.* Here we eat. Thirty minute, hey? Now" — he gestured round at the houses — "you go buy. See round."

"Buy? Buy where? asked Lillian.

"Dentro de," said Manuelo, stabbing the air with his forefinger. *"Alli. Alli."*

"He means inside the houses, I think," said Virginia.

"Si, señora. Inside de 'ouses. *Vaya!"* He grinned at her and made a shooing gesture with his hand.

As though this were the signal they had been awaiting, women began to emerge from the doorways of the white houses. They stood silently with blankets and shawls draped over their arms. One or two held articles of painted pottery. They made no attempt at all to draw attention to their wares.

"Those look like ponchos to me," said Bob to Miss Price. "Could this be your lucky day, Phyllis?"

Trailed by a whispering group of children, Virginia and Michael wandered out of the square to where the higher of the two bridges hung above the cleft in the mountainside. There they took more photographs of each other and attempted, unsuccessfully, to persuade one of the children to take

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a picture of the two of the two of them together. Nor would the children allow themselves to photographed. As soon as Michael raised the camera to his eye and turned in their direction, they squealed and scampered away. "You'd think they'd never set eyes on a tourist before," he observed wryly. "I suppose we should have tried offering them a few pesos."

"They think taking their pictures gives you some sort of hold over them," said Virginia. "I remember reading it somewhere."

They settled for a series of shots of an old woman who was leading two laden llamas over the swaying bridge. As she came abreast of them she too bowed profoundly, then raised her eyes and made a curious hand sign in the air before Virginia, who bowed and smiled in return.

"You've got to hand it to them for politeness," murmured Michael. "What was all that about do you suppose?"

"Warding off the evil eye maybe."

He laughed and restored his camera to its case. No sooner had he done so than the children emerged from their hiding places and advanced shyly towards them. "Don't *any* of you speak Spanish?" demanded Virginia. *"No hablan espanol?"*

Their dark eyes gleamed like polished pebbles of obsidian, and one who appeared to be the leader of the group murmured something which sounded like *quoya* and made a beckoning motion to those behind him.

A tiny girl was pushed forward by the others. Clutched to her chest she held a bunch of wild flowers. With downcast eyes she plodded gravely forward and thrust the flowers out towards Virginia.

"Gracias. Muchas gracias," said Virginia, squatting down so that her head was more or less on a level with the infant's. *"Tu eres muy, muy amable."* She took the flowers and gathered them to her face, inhaling their honeyed fragrance while the child stood there gazing at her with a puzzled frown until one of the others stepped forward and led her away.

As Virginia rose to her feet the children all bowed like a chorus of mechanical dolls, then turned and scampered back into the village.

"Do you think we ought to have given them something?" said Michael.

She shook her head. "They would've stayed if they'd wanted that."

He put his arm about her and they were strolling back towards the square when they both heard a sound like distant thunder. It rolled back and forth among the high peaks and ebbed slowly away in the thin bright air. Virginia stopped in her tracks, her head tilted slightly to one side, her attitude one of intense concentration.

"What is it, Vee?"

"Shh," she whispered. "Yes. There. Don't you hear it?"

"Hear what?"

She frowned and slowly turned in a

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complete circle, gazing round and up to where the snow-capped peaks of the high sierra shimmered like spectral banners against the deep violet-blue of the sky.

"What is it?" he repeated. "What can you hear?"

"I don't know what it was," she said. "A kind of humming noise. But so high. A bit like a bugle maybe. Far off. Roland at Roncesvalles."

"What?"

She shook her head and smiled at his obvious bewilderment. "Oh, forget it," she said. "Come on, I'm hungry."

"But I don't get it, Vee. Who the hell's Roland what's-his-name?"

"It doesn't matter. It was just something to say. Come on."

He allowed her to take his arm as he protested in a slightly aggrieved tone: "You know, Vee, sometimes you make me feel that I don't understand the very first damned thing about you."

The others were waiting for them in the square. Lillian Masters and Miss Price were both holding what appeared to be ponchos. Bob was clutching a decorated ceramic jug in the shape of a pot-bellied duck. "'Ello, 'ello, 'ello," he hailed them. "Been gathering ye rosebuds, have we?"

"You don't seem to have done so badly yourself," said Michael.

"It's fantastic, Vee," confided Lillian breathily. "Just *feel* that! I'll swear it's pure alpaca! Talk about robbing the blind! Honestly it makes me feel ashamed."

Virginia fingered the soft silky texture of the wool. "It's lovely," she said. "Where did you get it?"

"That one over there," said Lillian, pointing across the square. "Go on, love. Why don't you? There's plenty of time."

But she was wrong. The words were scarcely uttered before Manuelo appeared at the doorway to the *posada* and called to them to step inside. He had discarded his peaked cap and his jacket and replaced them with a sort of beaded headband and a braided tabard which had the instant effect of making him appear like a figure who had stepped out from the pages of one of the ancient Jesuit chronicles of the Inca. Only his eyes, dark, hooded, secretly amused, remained the eyes of el Capitano of the *Sun Bird.*

He assisted them one by one over the threshold and indicated that they should place their coats and their purchases on a carved wooden table which was standing in a corner of the room. The only exception was the bunch of flowers which Virginia was holding. These Manuelo took from her with *con su permiso, señora?"* and handed them to one of the women, who bowed and disappeared with them into the regions at the back of the room which were concealed from their view behind a bead curtain.

The four women were directed through one door and the men through

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another. Bob and Michael found themselves in a primitive hut spotlessly clean washing room where they rinsed their hands and generally made themselves ready. Finally each was handed an embroidered sleeveless smock. "In for a penny," muttered Bob, wriggling into his. "Just as well they don't go in for mirrors, eh?"

Michael grinned. "When in Rome... besides, I think it suits you."

"Chalk it up to experience, as my old man used to say. Come on, lad. We'll do."

They returned to the main hall and discovered that during their absence some two dozen male Indians had entered the *posada*. They had discarded their ponchos and were wearing the same sort of embroidered smocks and woven headbands as Manuelo. Some, the more senior, had strings of beads round their necks and rosettes of brightly dyed feathers fastened to their chests with elaborate silver brooches.

"Better than a Grand Lodge beano," whispered Bob. "I wouldn't have missed this for all the butties in Bradford."

The old man who had conducted them from the ship now came forward, clasped his hands before him and bowed. Then he led them to a long low table and said to each in perfect Spanish: "*Sientese por favor, señor.*"

"He wants us to sit down," murmured Michael. "*Gracias, señor. Muchas gracias.*"

The taking of their places appeared to be the signal for all the male guests to do likewise. Each of them bowed to Michael and Bob. Apart from a group of musicians huddled in one corner, only Manuelo and the old man remained standing.

The old man surveyed the table and, seemingly satisfied with what he saw, called out some command in the native tongue and clapped his hands.

Still looking irrepressibly English despite their fancy dress, Miss Price and Miss Phillips were conducted into the hall followed closely by Lillian who, catching sight of Bob and Michael, waved her hand and caroled: "Isn't this a perfect scream? Just wait till you see young Vee!"

While the women were being shown to their places, four servers emerged from behind the curtains. Each was bearing a large earthenware jug. They moved silently along the table pouring beer into pottery goblets. As they completed the circuit and retired whence they had come, the old patriarch clapped his hands again. All the Indians rose to their feet and raised their goblets.

Suddenly, in a voice which made the rafters ring, the old man bawled: "*Coya Illapa!*"

"*Coya Illapa!*" roared the Indians and turned to face the door.

"What did I tell you?" crowed Lillian. "Isn't she a picture!"

"Good God!" exclaimed Michael. "What's going on?"

Virginia was wearing a long dress of pure white wool gathered in at the

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waist, classical Greek fashion, by a scarlet belt, and drawn together at her breast by a golden sunburst brooch. Round her forehead was bound a narrow fillet of gold and silver braid. On her feet were scarlet leather sandals.

The old man bowed low before her, then with a wholly antique grace took her gently by the hand. As he led her round to the end of the table, the musicians began to play on their flutes and drums.

"It's like being at a play," said Michael, gazing up at his transformed bride. "You look bloody smashing, love."

Virginia grinned at him and took her place opposite him at the head of the table with the old man on her right. As she settled herself down on the cushions, she leant across to Michael and whispered, "You won't believe what I've got on under this."

"What?"

"Nothing. Not a stitch."

"You're kidding!"

She shook her head and with the fingers of her right hand coaxed apart the panels of her dress just below the brooch.

Michael's eyes widened. "You're crazy, Vee," he whispered. "You could catch your death."

"Don't you believe it," she said. "This is pure vicuña. It must be worth a fortune. You feel it."

She held out her arm and he fingered the fabric of her dress. "I don't get it," he said. "Do you suppose they lay on this sort of fiesta for everyone?"

"Hey up," said Bob. "It looks as if they're waiting for you to start the ball rolling, Vee. Here's to you, love." Lifting his goblet, he cried out to the table at large: "A toast to the Queen of the May!"

"*Coya Illapa,*" murmured the Indians, and everybody raised their gobletse again and drank.

Manuelo appeared from the back of the hall bearing a vase containing the bunch of flowers. He placed it on the table before Virginia, murmured "*Felicidades!*" then indicated the vacant seat on her left and enquired: "*Con su permiso?*"

She nodded and smiled, and when he had taken his place, she asked him in her halting Spanish if he was Quechua.

"*Si,*" he said.

"From this village?"

He shook his head. "From Cajamarca. I have family here in Huacaloc." He gestured to the old man. "He, Amauta, the brother of my father."

While they were talking, the serving women were trotting back and forth carrying wooden bowls of food to the table. There seemed to be no end to them. Several varieties of cooked meats and at least a dozen different kinds of vegetables together with an assortment of pickles and spices. As before, everyone appeared to be waiting for some signal from Virginia. She turned to Manuelo. "What must I do?"

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"Take and eat," he said with a smile.

She helped herself from the bowl nearest to her, lifted a forkful of *charqui* to her lips, chewed it with obvious relish, and swallowed it.

There was a profound sigh of satisfaction all down the length of the table, and next moment everyone seemed to start talking at once as they reached out and piled food onto their plates.

It was not long before the *chicha* had begun to take effect. Under its potent influence Miss Price found herself engaged in animated conversation with an elderly Indian on her left and had called to her aid a surprising repertoire of improvised mime together with assorted words of Spanish and Italian and anything else which came to mind. Every so often they pledged each other in *chicha* and roared with laughter.

Across the table Miss Phillips appeared to be lecturing a mystified Indian on the deficiencies of the Peruvian Tourist Bureau, with special regard to the city of El Atras; Bob Masters was explaining to Manuelo just how it was that the Peruvian football team had failed to reach the semi-finals of the recent World Cup; and Michael and Lillian had discovered that they shared a passion for the subtleties of the game of snooker.

Old Amauta had taken it upon himself to tell Virginia the story of the god whose feast they were celebrating, but his habit of breaking out of Spanish into a sort of sing-song chant in Quechuan effectively prevented her from making much sense of it. She gathered that Illapa dwelt among the stars and that he had sovereignty over the thunder and lighting but that was about the sum of it. So she contented herself with smiling and nodding while from the corner of her eye she watched the musicians and dancers who appeared to be staging an otherwise unregarded nonstop performance in the background.

Eventually the serving women removed the bowls of uneaten food and replaced them with baskets of fruit. Before each guest they placed a small, handleless earthenware cup. Two male Indians began filling these vessels from various spouted jugs.

Virginia's cup was charged by old Amauta himself pouring a pale amber stream from a small black flash which was shaped in the form of a squatting man. "Illapa," he informed her, setting the vessel down before her and caressing the head of the figurine with his long, thin fingers. *"Muy viejo."*

"How old?" she asked curiously.

He pulled an expressive face. *"Muchoas años."*

"A hundred?"

"Mas." He opened and closed both his hands twice over. *"Dos mil."*

"Two *thousand* years old! Really?" She lifted the flask and discovered that it was carved from a single lump of greeny-black obsidian. Despite the fact that it was barely six inches high, the impression it gave was of an enor-

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mous, almost ponderous strength. As she set it down again, she was aware of a curious sense of physical chill that seemed to spread up from her fingertips to her chest.

The old man lifted her filled cup and placed it between her hands. Then he raised his own cup and murmured something to Manuelo, who nodded and said to Virginia, "When drum stop you drink, yes? All one go."

She sniffed at the cup and thought she could detect a faint odor of almonds. "What is it?" she asked.

Manuelo frowned, searching his memory for unfamiliar words, and finally, hesitantly, offered: *"Licor.* In Quechuan, Milk of God."

At the far end of the hall the drummer had begun to thud out a heavy pulsing rhythm using the heel of his hand on the quivering membrane of stretched skin. The laughter and voices died away into a tense, expectant silence. Virginia found herself counting under her breath ... five ... six ... seven .... The beat was growing faster, bouncing back and forth between the blank stone walls, echoes rebounding among echoes until, suddenly, there was nothing.

"Now," murmured Manuelo's voice at her ear.

She raised the cup with both hands, closed her eyes tight and swallowed the draught at a single gulp. The thin syrup left an aftertaste like wild apricots on her tongue.

* * *

Every two hundred yards or so the cortège came to a halt; the wooden litter was carefully set down, and obeisance was made to the guardian *huaca* of that section of the track. In some places the path was so narrow that the musicians were constrained to walk in single file, though never for a moment did they stop their piping. The music floated out over the airy abyss like the song of some spectral bird while, to The Chosen One, the murmurous chanting seemed to advance and recede like the hush of summer waves lisping along the shores of sleep. With a curiously remote yet reassuring certainty she knew that she was asleep and that this was nothing but an extraordinarily vivid dream whose rituals though strange were yet familiar to her.

She looked down at the small golden bowl nestling in her lap, lifted out two of the lime-smeared coca leaves and placed them upon her tongue as she had done a thousand times before. Likewise, when the procession reached the stone portal in the mountainside and Amauta stepped forward and handed her the sacred golden cup, it seemed to her that it was still warm from the previous touch of her own lips.

She bowed to him, thereby acknowledging him to be both Amauta and Villac Umu the High Priest, and then she handed back to him the empty cup and the bowl and permitted him to take her by the hand and lead her into the shrine.

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In the stone antechamber she stood with closed eyes while he removed her dress, laid the cloak of fur about her shoulders and made it fast with the golden brooch. Then he knelt before her and with his own hands unfastened her sandals and placed the fur slippers upon her feet.

Stone lamps set into cunning niches sent shadows flapping like dark wings across the rough-hewn walls as they slipped past, winding ever deeper into the mountain along the paved track that had kept its silent secret for more than a thousand years. They passed through the inner chamber where, ranked along shelves quarried from the ribbed rock, grotesque idols of stone and precious metal peered down at them with blank incurious eyes, and emerged at last into the innermost sanctum — a chamber wrought by titanic forces when the world was young, a bubble blown like some huge water drop in the long cold volcanic magma, the womb of Pachamama herself. From high, high above, daylight filtering dimly down through the fissure of an ancient blowhole gave just enough illumination for her to see the still waters of the pool below.

Amauta laid his bony hand upon her shoulder and thrust her gently forward to where the paved causeway had been widened out into a terrace. A flight of shadowy steps led down to the pool beneath. At the top of the steps thick woven covers of soft wool had been spread across a cradle of woven cornstalks. There she knelt and, gazing down into the water, saw the faint gleam of long-drowned gold deep within it.

She heard the fading *rap-rap* of the old man's leather sandals on the stones, heard the final echoes lap away into breathless silence, and knowing that she was at last alone, she found herself for one tremulous, terrifying moment hovering uncertainly between the real self that was Coya The Chosen One and the phantom self who had once been Virginia. For that appalling instant she seemed to be staring not into the limpid waters of the pool but down into an infinitely receding succession of images of herself which stretched out, fainter and ever more faint, until they were lost in the star-flecked darkness of oblivion. In that not-yet-world she became frailer than a bird's shadow on the mist and heard the thin, lost voices of ghosts whispering to ghosts across the abyss.

But even though she was unaware of it, she had in that moment crossed the final threshold to become one with all those other selves who long ago had bled upon the high Altar of the Mists, all those who had ever knelt where she was kneeling now. She became fired with a fierce wild pride that she and she alone had been chosen above all others as the warm life-link between the Children of Viracocha and the Celestial Ones who dwelt forever in the ringing halls of eternal light. Her eager fingers fumbled to unclasp the golden

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brooch which held the cloak pinned about her throat.

The jewel fell like a falling star. The ripples surged outwards and met the dark rocks. Fleeing back and forth, crossing and crisscrossing, they wove themselves into an intricately convoluted web among whose threads the golden offerings of the past jigged and glittered like a swarm of fireflies.

As the waters slowly settled back into stillness, she heard once again that haunting, far-off call, remote and silvery as stardust. Her heart melted within her, and the cloak slid whispering from her naked shoulders.

Most willing of Danaes, she bowed her head and through amazed, half-lowered eyelids beheld the dawn rising slowly up from the pool in a fountaining column of pure white light. Higher and higher it rose, assuming by degrees the bright-winged form her rapt soul willed. He who was Illapa, who was Ahuro Mazdao who was Zeus; who was Mithras and Ra and fair-browed Adonis and dazzling Inti, Monarch of the Skies, gazed down upon the Daughter of Earth and saw that she was fair to behold. There was a murmur in the cavern as of a warm south wind rustling through ancient olive groves, which sound is the breath of the Gods; and a sound like that of shallow sunlit streams running in pebbled places, which is the joyful laughter of the Gods. And then all ways the startled shadows fled; the cavern's womb glowed red and silver and molten gold; and far off down the winding whispering galleries old Amauta heard the sound for which he had been waiting — part cry, part sigh — the voice of Life itself.

Led by Manuelo the party from the *Sun Bird* toiled panting up the steep zig-zag path and emerged at last upon the rim of the crater. Below them a track similar to that by which they had ascended led down towards the green water. Manuelo pushed his cap back on his head and gestured to where a second, almost invisible track branched off from the other. Like a thread of beige cotton it wriggled its way along the cliff to where a stone balcony had been cantilevered out to cling like a frail nest to an almost perpendicular section of the rock face. "That Illapa's shrine," he grinned. "You want I take you?"

"How about it, Vee?"

Virginia shuddered. "It makes me giddy just to look at it. You go if you want to."

Michael laughed. "Not with this hangover."

"I believe they used to throw gold offerings into these lakes," said Miss Phillips.

"*Si*," said Manuelo nodding. "Much gold."

"In there?" said Lillian. "What on earth for?"

"To ensure a good harvest," said Miss Phillips. "Illapa was a rain god."

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"Seems a bit of a waste," said Bob. "Hasn't anyone tried to fish it up?"

Manuelo glanced across at him and nodded. "*Si*," he said. "*Conquistadores.*"

"What happened?"

"Illapa angry. They get sick. Die."

"Did they find anything?"

"A little. They drown many of our people. All long ago."

Miss Price said, "Ask him if his people still really *believe* in Illapa."

There was no need to translate. Manuelo understood the question perfectly. "Jesu Christ Inca now," he said and crossed himself devoutly.

They took photographs of the lake and of each other and then made their way back to the village, where they reentered the *posada* to collect their purchases and to make use of the toilets for the last time. They found that all traces of the feast had been spirited away and that the long table had been replaced by a wooden altar. Hanging from the wall above it was a large ornate wooden crucifix from which drooped a horrifyingly life-like Christ modeled in colored wax. The muffled sound of women's laughter came from the kitchen quarters.

Bob and Michael stood shoulder to shoulder before the stone urinal. "I reckon that must be as good a thousand pesos worth as you're likely to get anywhere," Bob observed. "Blowed if I can see how he makes a go of it."

"I don't suppose he needs to," said Michael, stifling a yawn. "It's probably government-subsidized."

"You reckon? Sort of state enterprise? Like in China?"

"Something like that."

"You could be right. Eh, lad, but that *clicha* was a fair old knockout. Fact is, I can't take the booze like I used to. I don't mind telling you I came close to dropping off more than once."

"The altitude may have had something to do with it."

Bob nodded. "Shame I didn't get a photo of us in that fancy dress. A prize for the album, eh? Young Vee queening it and all." He wriggled his plump buttocks, backed away from the wall and broke wind loudly. "Illapa," he chuckled, tugging at his zipper. "Illapa the farter! What a bloody crazy carry on."

Manuelo drew up the ladder and made fast the door of the *Sun Bird*. "We go different way back," he informed them. "Good trip, hey? *Estupendo!*"

A chorus of voices assured him that he was not mistaken. He grinned and glanced round the cabin, his dark eyes lingering for a moment upon Virginia. Then he took out his wallet. "We pay now, please. *Mil pesos. Señoras. Señores.*"

The notes were duly handed over, checked and stowed safely away. Manuelo walked to the window, shouted directions to the natives to loose the moorings, and then took his seat at the controls. "*Adios, Huacaloc!*" he called and raised his right hand in salute.

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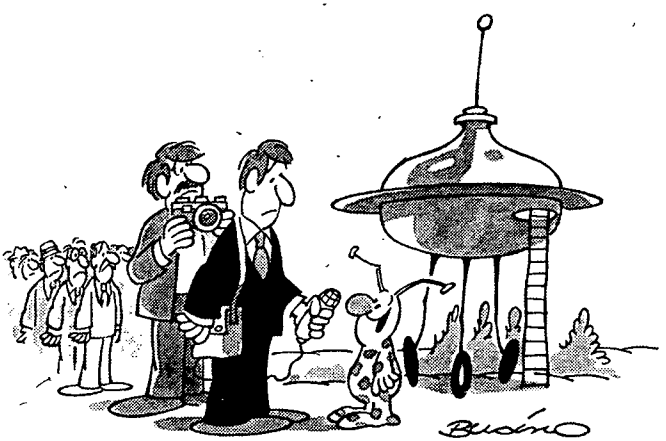
Silently the ship rose, withdrawing itself fastidiously from the mountainside. A few children waved farewell. Had it not been for them, the village might well have appeared deserted.

Virginia rested her aching forehead against the cool plexiglass and let her gaze wander off along a deserted track that scarred the steep flank of the mountain like a half-healed scratch until it vanished from her sight round a distant fold. For a moment it seemed to her as if she was holding an end of that path between her fingers and that it was being drawn out thinner and fainter beneath her like some fragile streamer that must inevitably break and flutter away into emptiness. She did not know if what she thought had happened had really happened or was simply an extraordinarily vivid dream which she had dreamt while she herself had been lying as she had seen the others lying, sprawled snoring among the cups and fruit rinds, dead to the world.

And yet already the dream was fading, slipping like water through her groping fingers, leaving only disconnected droplets — a golden bowl, a brooch, a brightness beyond belief. Soon those too would be gone and there would be nothing left at all except.... Surreptitiously she raised her right hand and pressed it against her chest. Yes, it was still there, hanging by its twist of silver thread about her neck just as the old man's hands had placed it — a small golden figure of a rampant pagan god. Warmed by her own body's warmth, it lay there, couched snugly down between her breasts and would not be denied.



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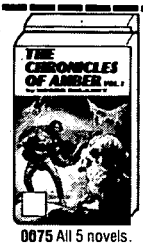

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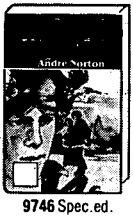

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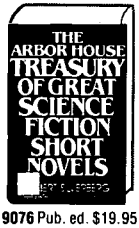

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